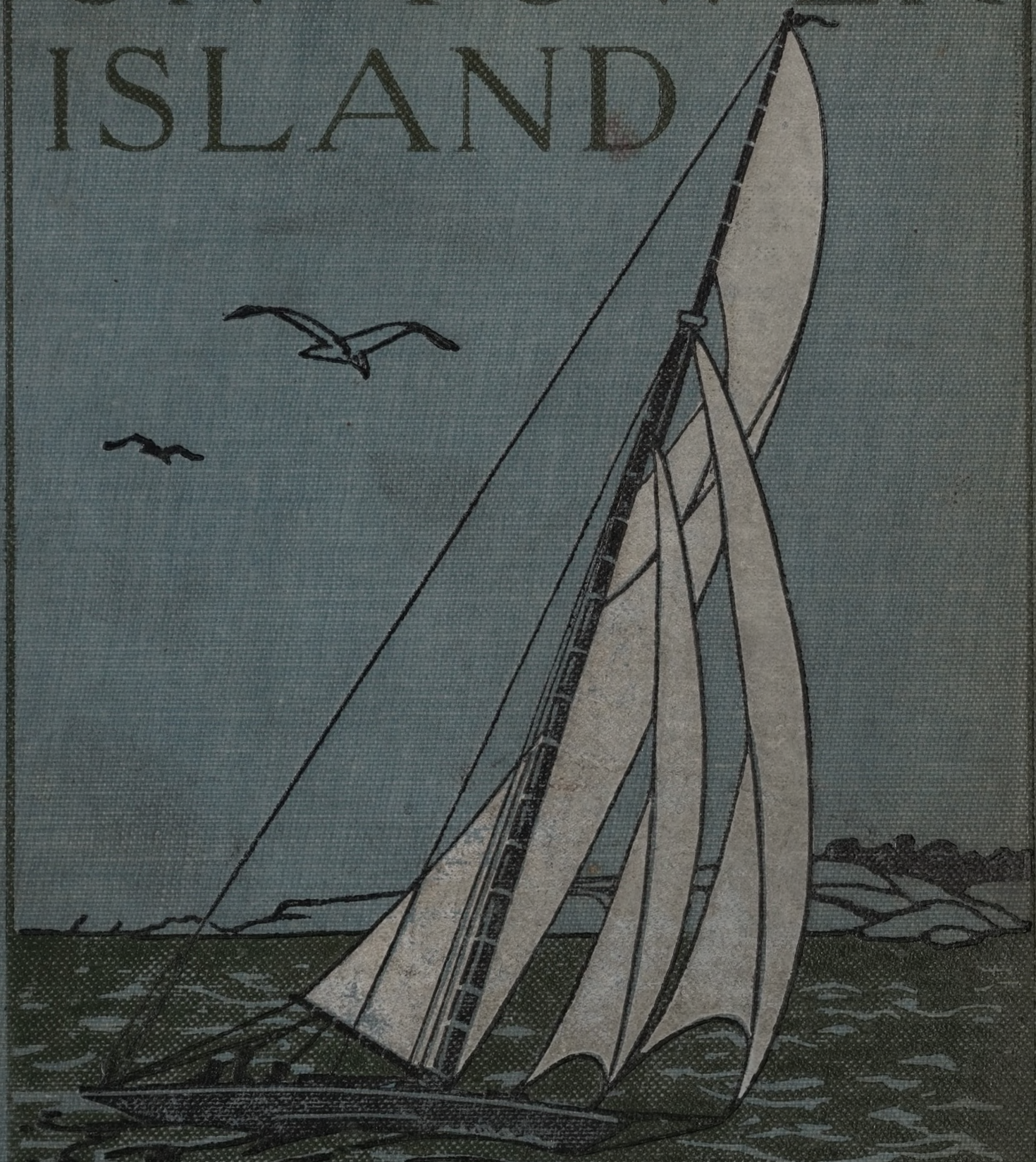
ON TOWER ISLAND



EARL C. McALLISTER



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ON TOWER ISLAND

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Tower Island

On Tower Island

CHAPTER I

A POLICY AND A YACHT

It was, after all, through a singular circumstance that Val Brandon bought the sloop-yacht "Spitfire," for any life insurance agent will tell you that it is scarcely once in a lifetime a man walks into his office asking to be insured for a hundred thousand dollars.

One day in January a man, portly of build and well dressed, entered the office of the Liberty Mutual Insurance Company's State agency at Stroudport. It being the noon hour, the cashier, who occupied the front office, was at dinner. His quarters were for the time deserted, and the portly man waited some moments for some one to appear, until, becoming impatient, he rapped loudly on the railing of the cashier's desk.

"Halloo," he called. "Is there no one here?"

The words were scarcely uttered before a door leading to an inner office, on which appeared the

lettering "Private," opened with some vigor. A young man emerged—a sturdily built, pleasant-faced, clean-cut fellow of twenty-one. It was Percival, otherwise known as "Val," Brandon, private secretary to the General Manager of the agency.

"Here's one of us, sir," he said pleasantly.

"Good," retorted the visitor, wheeling about. "Where's the manager, Mr. Culverson?"

"Out of town, sir," responded Val, politely. "He will return next week."

"Hum," mused the stranger. "That will scarcely do for me. Supposing I give up the ghost before he comes back, without any insurance on my life? What then, young man?"

He spoke in a humorous, good-natured tone, and as he gazed waggishly at Val, that young man noticed that the speaker had a slight cast in the left eye that heightened the humor of his glance.

"Don't let that worry you," Val returned, laughing, "for, to use a slang phrase, there are others."

"I judge you are one of the others," continued the newcomer.

"Yes, sir."

"Then I want to talk with you."

"Come into the private office," said Val. He led the way into the rear of the establishment, and seated the stranger in the inner sanctum.

"Here is my card, Mr. — Mr.——," began the visitor, holding out a slip of pasteboard.

"My name is Brandon," said Val, coming to the

rescue, and taking the proffered card. "Percival K. Brandon, at your service."

The card read as follows: —

"Maj. E. J. Bangs,
"Bangs Flour Co.,
"Stroudport."

"I am to understand that you are an authorized agent of the Liberty Mutual, am I?" began Major Bangs, coming to the point of his business.

"That is correct," was Val's reply, "and there is no possible excuse left for your giving up the ghost with no insurance on your life, if the company will accept the risk."

Major Bangs laughed heartily.

"I'm cornered," was his facetious declaration, "and I surrender. And now I am at your mercy, I will take out a policy. What is the limit of insurance your company will place on one person?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," was Val's reply, uttered with no little excitement.

"I want a policy for that amount," was the startling declaration. "Will you put me through?"

Val Brandon almost leaped from his chair in elation. The "plums" of life insurance are not usually gathered by sitting in one's office and waiting for applicants to call. The successful agent spends little time "holding down" his office furniture. He gets out and "hustles," if he would win

bread and butter. But here was a man who, without any solicitation, walked in and asked for insurance on his life; and not for a paltry thousand or two, either, but for one hundred thousand dollars — the full amount that Val's company would place upon a single life.

Major Bangs seemed to enjoy the situation hugely. He smiled at Val's illy concealed eagerness.

"I'm a rare bird," he exclaimed, with a laugh. "You don't see men like me every day. Life insurance would boom if they were all as easy victims as I. But there is a method in my madness.

"I am the chief owner in a syndicate controlling the output of several large flouring mills in the West," he went on easily. "We are making arrangements to increase our direct export business, and for our purpose Stroudport is extremely well adapted. Whenever we establish a branch house of any importance, as the Bangs Flour Company of Stroudport will soon become, I customarily insure my life for a good sum, payable to the company, to protect the business in the event of my sudden demise.

"There's the story in a nutshell," the Major concluded. "Now let us have the application signed quickly, for I'm in a hurry," and the flour magnate glanced at his elaborately chased gold watch.

Val seized a rate-book, and began an animated disquisition upon the various policy plans his company offered. Major Bangs had his mind made up.

"I want the most insurance you can give for the least money," he declared.

"Then a straight life policy is the thing," said Val.

"How much will that cost a year?"

"At your age, thirty-two hundred and twenty dollars."

"Make out the application, then, and I'll sign," replied the visitor.

The application for life insurance is usually made upon a blank form. At the Major's dictation Val filled out one such, giving the applicant's exact place and date of birth, business, and so forth. The Major affixed his signature, and after arrangements had been made by telephone with the company's medical examiner to give Major Bangs the necessary medical examination, — for without a satisfactory medical certificate the company would not accept the risk or issue the policy, — he shook hands with Val and departed, leaving that young person overjoyed with the luck that had descended upon him.

For, be it known, that the business of the life insurance agent is conducted mainly upon what is termed the "commission basis"; that is, the agent gets pay for his work in the shape of a percentage or commission, on the amount of the premium paid for the insurance.

How big a commission Val Brandon received on the premium paid by Major Bangs doesn't matter,

but suffice it to say, it was enough to purchase the jaunty sloop-yacht "Spitfire" outright, and leave something in the savings bank besides.

For, needless to say, Major Bangs was rated "first class" by the medical examiner, and the Liberty Mutual issued the policy promptly. And when Val carried it up to the new office of the Bangs Flour Company, although the Major himself proved to be absent, the man in charge accepted the policy without question, and gave in exchange a check for the premium, signed "Bangs Flour Co., by J. H. Wheelock, Treasurer."

CHAPTER II

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE "SEA ROVER"

THE sloop-yacht "Spitfire" had been built the year before for Jim Brandon, Val's cousin, who lived at Seaville, thirty odd miles from Stroudport. But as Jim had secured a much-coveted appointment to the Naval Academy at Annapolis, and would be away most of the time for four years, and no one knew how much longer, he decided to part with the yacht. And so it fell out, that when Jim offered the boat for sale, Val insured Major Bangs and purchased the jaunty craft with a portion of his profits from the transaction.

All this happened early in the year, while the "Spitfire" was still hauled out of the water at Seaville. Between that time and July, Val, and his two most intimate friends, Carroll Morse — usually nicknamed "Cal" — and Sumner Parker, or "Sum," consumed a deal of brain tissue in planning a four weeks' cruise alongshore to the eastward. The itinerary of the cruise, the regulations for working the yacht, lists of provisions and personal baggage, and last, but not least, the painting and overhauling of the sloop — which, of course, was done at Seaville before she went into the water in the spring —

were subjects discussed in all their phases in many enthusiastic consultations.

The "Spitfire" was a sloop-yacht, thirty-five feet over all, and, to be brief, carried four sails — main, jib, gaff-topsail, and jib-topsail. She had ample cabin accommodation for four, and was all around one of the neatest and fastest craft of her size that ever came into Stroudport Bay.

The cruise alongshore contemplated a run eastward to Bar Harbor and perhaps beyond. Val had secured a four weeks' vacation; Sumner and Carroll were both enjoying midsummer vacations, the one from high school, the other from college, and had no difficulty in finding time for the cruise. Jim Brandon had been invited to accompany them, but he was cramming for his Annapolis exams, and was unable to accept. A cousin of Cal's, Farleigh Hartwell, who was spending the summer at Harpsboro, twenty miles down the bay, was next asked to increase the party to four, and accepted. Harpsboro being the "Spitfire's" first stopping-place, according to the schedule, Hartwell was to be taken aboard upon her arrival there.

The rules and regulations divided the crew into two watches, port and starboard. Yachting was no new thing for either Val or Cal. Both were members of the Stroudport Yacht Club, and had spent many hours in the "High Jinks," a twenty-five footer that Carroll had owned, until the drunken skipper of a tug ran her down at anchorage two summers previous, and fairly cut her in two.

Therefore, Val, as captain, took charge of the port watch, and Hartwell was told off as the other member, while Carroll, who was chosen mate, had charge of the starboard watch, consisting of himself and Sumner.

This was the state of affairs on July 1, the day that Val and Cal went down to Seaville and brought the "Spitfire" around to Stroudport.

"Oh, the ocean waves may roll,
And the stormy winds may blow—"

sang Sumner Parker, lustily. Sumner was sitting astride the rudder-post of the "Spitfire's" neat little tender, supposed to be steering. He was barefooted, and dabbled his feet energetically in the cool water of Stroudport Harbor as the boat advanced through the efforts of Cal at the oars.

Sumner was, as usual, in a happy frame of mind. He was a short, fat, roly-poly youth of sixteen years, with jovial, ruddy face, and an inexhaustible fund of good nature. An expert in a rowboat, his knowledge of things nautical ended there. To supply this, to him, deplorable deficiency, for weeks past — in fact, ever since the subject of the cruise had been broached to him — he had literally devoured all the sea tales he could get his hands upon, together with various other works of a nautical nature. A thick book entitled "The Strange Adven-

tures of Jasper Jenks Afloat and Ashore" claimed his especial attention as a highly valuable authority on marine matters. He occasionally quoted it, much to Val and Cal's amusement.

Sumner had his head full of sea phrases and the theory of navigation. In his enthusiasm he even went so far as to borrow a sextant and chronometer of Captain Bucklin, a retired sea-captain, who spent his time directing several ocean tugs and raising carrier-pigeons. He purchased a work on navigation, did Sumner, and a nautical almanac, and thus equipped worked for many hours endeavoring to ascertain the latitude and longitude of Peaked Island, three miles down the harbor, where his summers were spent. At the time of which I write he had succeeded in getting the longitude according to the figures given by the almanac, but the latitude would not work out twice the same, and on no occasion did it agree with the statement in the almanac.

"Oh, the ocean waves may roll."

he began again, his former strain having been interrupted.

"Oh, give us a breeze," exclaimed Cal, with good-natured impatience. A flat calm had fallen upon the bay at the exact time the boys wished to sail the "Spitfire" over from her anchorage to Stevens' Wharf to put aboard provisions and baggage for the cruise, which was to begin early the following morning.

There was nothing left but to tow her over with the tender, and with Val aboard the yacht at her tiller, and Sumner directing the course of the row-boat, Carroll was expending his muscular force in an effort to bring about the desired result.

"Give us a breeze," he repeated. "Haven't heard anything but 'Oh, the ocean waves may roll,' for two weeks. Try something else. Try barrels," he suggested, laughing, "they'll roll."

"You don't know a good thing when you hear it," responded Sumner, in no wise disconcerted.

"Then that must be Jasper Jenks' favorite song," was Cal's sly retort.

Sumner began a reply, but, happening to glance aside, scrambled hastily to his feet with a cry of alarm.

"Back water! Back water!" he ejaculated. "No. Go ahead, quick!"

They were towing the yacht obliquely across the harbor to the wharf. The somewhat erratic course steered by Sumner brought them close to the pier heads at some distance from their own berth, necessitating the skirting of two other wharves at close quarters to reach their own.

The "Spitfire" was nosing along at the end of sixty odd feet of line. As the rowboat cleared the end of a pier and started across the open dock between that wharf and the next, without warning of any sort, a steam-yacht, with the words "Sea Rover" painted on her stern, backed suddenly out of the slip and bore down on the tow-line.

"Stop her! Stop her!" howled Sumner and Cal in chorus.

A head stuck suddenly out of the steam-yacht's pilot-house; the head of a man with a big hooked nose — a nose that Sumner had afterward reason to recall.

"Get out of that!" he shouted.

"Reverse her, you lubber. You'll swamp us," called Sumner with great energy, as the stern of the yacht tautened the tow-line till the light tender was swung forcibly up against the "Sea Rover's" quarter, and dragged stern foremost through the water.

Believing the rowboat was about to go under, Sumner jumped for the yacht's rail, and climbed to the after-deck; but the engine was quickly reversed and the steamer came to a stop just as a portly man stepped out of the after-cabin.

"What's the matter here?" he asked, in wonder, confronting Sumner.

"Matter enough," retorted Sumner, indignantly. "Why don't you keep your eyes peeled," he demanded, "and blow your whistle when you back out of a dock? You 'most swamped us with your measly tub."

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure," began the man, a suspicion of a smile lurking on his face, as he noted Sumner's fierce aggressiveness.

"Pardon," sniffed Sumner, with fine scorn. "What would you beg if you had drowned us all?

Just tell your helmsman to blow his whistle next time. That's more to the point."

"Well, you're not fish-food yet, my young friend," with a twinkle in his eyes, one of which had a waggish cast. "What are you doing with that line?"

Cal had recovered himself, and pulled the tender away from the yacht, thus bringing the tow-line into sight.

"There was a sailboat at the other end of it," retorted Sumner, hurrying to the other side of the steamer to inspect the "Spitfire," "and is now, if you haven't sunk her."

The "Spitfire," however, was all right, for when the "Sea Rover" had appeared so unexpectedly, Val simply put the tiller over as the tow-line tightened, and the sloop laid up alongside, with no damage but a little paint scraped.

The man followed Sumner, and as that young person clambered aboard the sloop, Val was surprised by the sound of a familiar voice, "Isn't this Percival K. Brandon?"

It was Major Bangs who spoke, and at sight of his quizzically humorous face, Val's perturbation vanished.

"Halloo, Major Bangs," he responded good-naturedly. "Are you trying to kill us all?"

"And deprive the Liberty Mutual of its best agent?" retorted Bangs. "Never! I'm camping out on Pod Island, and my friend, the skipper, is in such a great hurry to get me down there that

he forgot to signal when he backed out. I sincerely beg your pardon. What's up, anyway?" Bangs continued, with curiosity. "Off for a cruise, eh?"

"Four weeks alongshore," replied Val. During this time he was not idle. With Sumner's assistance the sloop was pushed clear of the "Sea Rover," Cal took up the slack in the tow-line, and the "Spitfire" resumed her journey. As she proceeded, Bangs walked along the steamer's deck, talking as he went.

"When do you start?" he asked, with sudden interest.

"To-morrow morning, if the weather holds fair."

"Eastward?"

Val nodded. The distance between the boats was now rapidly widening. The Major had to raise his voice.

"If you get becalmed near Pod Island," he shouted, "just come ashore and call. Latch-string always out. Don't forget, will you?"

Val bowed his acknowledgments, and turned his attention to the "Spitfire."

"He's mighty anxious to have you call on him, seems to me," was Sumner's remark. "Who is he, anyhow?"

"The man I insured for a hundred thousand," replied Val, carelessly.

"Oh, then you're well acquainted, which accounts for it," said Sum, in a tone of conviction.

"Never saw him but twice, and this is the second time."

"Whew!" exclaimed Sumner, in wonder. "He seemed to love you so, I thought he must at least be an uncle."

"I suppose it's merely his way. He'd probably talk the same way to the next man."

"I was the next man, but he didn't invite me," persisted Sum.

"You were included, of course," was Val's rather impatient response. "What a crank you are, Sum, when you get an idea into your old noddle."

"All I have to say is, I think Major Bangs is a funny duck," said Sumner.

"But you ought not to kick, for if it hadn't been for Bangs, we wouldn't have any yacht to cruise in."

"Bless his dear heart," was Sumner's retort, as, with mock effusion, he waved his cap at the "Sea Rover," now steaming rapidly down the harbor. A moment later he took a very sudden seat on the cockpit floor, for the sloop brought up against her wharf with a thump.

The balance of the afternoon was spent in getting aboard everything needed for the cruise. The eatables now taken on were mainly canned goods, and breadstuffs in tins. Fruit and fresh vegetables they purposed to buy at the various stopping-places. Bedding, clothing, a kerosene stove and fuel for it, a good-sized water beaker filled, books, the necessary coast charts — in fact, everything they thought needful, with the exception of Sumner and Farleigh

Hartwell's personal baggage, was put aboard that afternoon.

Sumner's summer home being on the line of the cruise, he planned to spend the night there, get his baggage together, and rejoin the yacht when it arrived in the early morning. Val and Cal were to sleep on board, and get an early start.

The last of the "cargo" was just aboard when a group appeared on the stringpiece of the wharf, and for the next half hour the boys held a farewell reception to Mr. and Mrs. Brandon, Mr. and Mrs. Morse, and Manager Culverson of the Liberty Mutual, aboard the "Spitfire," during which time the Manager seized the opportunity to present the young skipper with a brand-new patent taffrail log for recording the yacht's speed.

At nine o'clock Val and Cal turned in. Sumner had taken the last steamer for Peaked Island, and quiet settled down over Stevens' Wharf and the yacht tied up there.

Sometime in the wee small hours, the pair were roused from deep slumber by a commotion on the wharf.

Thump! Bang! Bang! Something heavy came tumbling down on the planking nearly over their heads.

The boys awoke just in time to catch a vexed exclamation.

"What are you doing? Do you want to wake up all Stroudport?"

CHAPTER III

A MIDNIGHT MYSTERY

CARROLL MORSE started up so abruptly that his head thumped forcibly against the deck above. But before he could cry out, Val's hand covered his mouth.

"Sh-h-h," whispered that person. "Something's up! Listen!"

Cal rather thought something was down, for certainly he had heard it drop; but he obeyed Val's admonition, and rose with him to peer out at the skylight, rubbing his aching head as he did so.

When the boys turned in, they had opened the skylights some dozen inches, and fastened them there. They had also locked the companion-doors, but left the hatch open, thus securing plenty of fresh air. Through the partly open skylight they now peeped without danger of discovery.

"Bring a lantern," said some one on the wharf, in an undertone.

"Lantern? You're crazy," retorted a voice that somehow sounded familiar to Val. "You'll queer the whole business with a light.

"Here, you," the voice continued. "The horse will stand without holding. Lend a hand with this box."

"There's a team on the wharf," whispered Cal to Val.

"Yes," was the reply, "and there's a steamer hauled up close astern of us."

The hiss of steam from a safety valve suddenly sounded on the air.

"Get a gait on there," impatiently muttered the person directing affairs. "We've got to get out of this."

One of the men on the wharf scrambled down aboard the steamer. What appeared to be a plank was laid from the wharf to the after-deck, and down its inclined surface a long box-like object was carefully slid. This operation was performed with very little noise, to the manifest satisfaction of all concerned, and at a word of command all but two went forward.

"Be all ready to start," was the gruff order, given in an undertone. "We'll be out of here in less than two minutes."

"If only the moon would come out," whispered Val to his companion at this juncture. "That fellow's voice seems familiar. I wish I could get a clear view of him."

But the moon was shielded by dense clouds, and down in the shadow of the high pier the gloom was quite intense. It was just possible to distinguish the shapes of objects on the steamer's deck, but identification of those aboard was out of the question.

The two on the after-deck drew nearer the stern,

until they were scarce fifteen feet from the pair so eagerly listening in the cabin of the "Spitfire."

"So you got my note O. K," began one.

"Correct you are," was the reply, and it was the familiar voice that uttered it.

"I've delivered the plant," went on the first, "and I want my pay."

"Here it is, as promised," returned the other, promptly. "There's a hundred there," he went on, apparently handing his companion money. "Take my word for it. Don't strike a light."

"I'll believe you," muttered the recipient. "But this is a risky job for me. A hundred won't go far if I'm pulled up, and by all that's holy," he went on, with energy, "if I *do* get nabbed and you don't stand behind me, I shall blow the whole game."

"You keep *your* mouth shut," exclaimed the other, firmly, "and you'll be all right. We'll stand behind you till the crack of doom. Better get ashore. We're going to clear out."

The man addressed climbed upon the wharf. By the instructions of the other, he cast off the lines. The steamer's propeller began to churn slowly, and the "Spitfire's" strange neighbor disappeared in the gloom without a light showing.

Then the team on the wharf moved quietly away, and all was silent once more. The whole operation had not occupied over ten minutes.

"Well?" It was Cal's voice that broke the stillness of the sloop's cabin. "Well, what do you make of it, anyhow?"

There was no need for silence now, and Val responded in his natural tones, answering question with question.

"Did you recognize the voice of that man who appeared to be boss?"

"No."

"It sounded familiar, but to save my life I can't place it," mused Val, perplexed.

"It was too dark to distinguish any one. I couldn't even tell the steamer; but I'll say this, Val, there's something crooked going on."

"I believe you," returned Val, "but what had we best do about it?"

"I say, notify the City Marshal, and let him look into the matter."

"And what have we to tell him?"

"Why," returned Cal, "that a team brought a box to Stevens' Wharf at"—here Cal struck a match and looked at his watch,—"one o'clock Tuesday morning, July 8——"

"That it was loaded on an unknown steamer by unknown men," broke in Val, with some sarcasm in his voice. "The unknown steamer steams off into the unknown and the unknown team drives away to the same place, and how the City Marshal would laugh at us."

"I don't believe it," Cal replied. "There is some other end to the clue. If that was a box of stolen stuff, the one who was robbed will notify the police. Our notification will be another link in the chain of evidence."

As this argument seemed eminently sensible, the upshot was that before the boys turned in again a brief letter was written to the Stroudport City Marshal, detailing the occurrence of the night, and referring him to their respective parents in case he should wish to communicate with the yachtsmen about the matter.

Just before the yacht got under way the following morning, Cal dropped this communication into a letter box at the head of the wharf, and at six they were off and the cruise really begun.

Like a yachtsman's dream the "Spitfire" looked as she cut daintily through the water. It was a clear morning, despite the cloudy night, and the sun shone brightly on a hull and deck resplendent with new paint, on mast and spars glistening with varnish, and on sails gleaming white as snow.

At Val's command Cal loaded the small brass cannon that stood lashed to the forward deck, and as the "Spitfire" glided past the clubhouse of the Stroudport Yacht Club, a salute was fired that awoke the echoes, and brought the sleepy janitor out to wave a good-by.

With every rag of canvas drawing, the yacht club pennant at the topmast head, and the stars and stripes at the main-peak, the yacht moved away before the gentle westerly breeze, heading for Peaked Island.

Sumner had agreed to be at the Peaked Island landing at seven sharp, bag and baggage; but so

eager was he to join the expedition that he could not wait for the yacht to come up to the wharf. He engaged a youth to row him and his belongings out to meet her in the channel.

So it came about that when the "Spitfire" was still a quarter of a mile from the island, Val and Cal became aware that a rowboat containing two persons was heading for the yacht, and shortly Sumner's roly-poly figure was distinguishable in the stern, and his cheery voice gave hail.

"'Spitfire,' ahoy!"

"All aboard for down-east," called Cal, from the forward deck.

The "Spitfire" came into the wind, with sails shaking. The rowboat came on apace. In his enthusiasm Sumner stood up and waved his cap, while the small boy at the oars pulled still more lustily.

"Look out," warned Cal, "you'll be into us." He leaned hastily down to fend off the rowboat. The rower paused in his work and gazed over his shoulder, while Sumner seized the opportunity to air a sea-phrase.

"Avast, you lubber!"

And then the rowboat struck the yacht a glancing blow, and Sum tumbled incontinently over upon his baggage, to lay there sprawling while Val and Cal laughed vociferously.

As soon as his equilibrium was regained, Sumner began pitching his effects aboard. A huge valise, a dress-suit case, a banjo, a mackintosh, a large wooden

box, and an object that resembled a small hencoop, came over the rail in quick succession, the intervals between their several transits being punctuated by Sumner with crisp remarks to his boatman regarding careless rowing.

"And now, young feller," he concluded, condescendingly, as the last piece was put aboard the yacht, "you ought to be put in irons, but—here's a quarter in place of the ten dollars I might have given you. You can go ashore."

Sum clambered aboard the "Spitfire," and she filled away.

"I thought you'd never get along," grumbled Sumner, as he began transferring a portion of his belongings to the cockpit, and thence to the cabin. "I've been hove to half an hour on that hot little wharf waiting for you."

"We started on time," replied Cal, who had taken the tiller, "but the wind was light. What have you got in that coop?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Val said, eyeing the miniature hencoop with curiosity.

"That's a life preserver," began Sumner, as he picked up the article in question and brought it down into the cockpit. "It's always customary for ships to carry hencoops, you know," he added, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "Anyhow, you always read about them in sea stories. When a fellow falls overboard, the first order is always 'throw him a hencoop,' so here's one for the 'Spitfire.'"

Cal began to laugh; but Val peered into the box.

"Halloo!" he exclaimed. "Carrier-pigeons, aren't they?"

"That's what," replied Sumner, proudly, "a pair of 'em. Captain Bucklin let me take 'em, and I've got feed for 'em in my baggage. There'll be times when we can't get to a post-office, and again, we may get into a fix and want to notify our folks."

"That's good," Cal affirmed. "I've read great tales of what carriers will do; now we'll have a chance to prove them."

"The Captain wouldn't let me bring the sextant and chronometer, though," mourned Sum, "so I guess we'll have to depend on dead reckoning."

"Why, didn't you bring Jasper Jenks along?" asked Cal, quickly.

"Of course."

"Then we are all right. The cruise would be a dismal failure without that standard authority to fall back on."

"I brought my pocket kodak, and ten strips of film," went on Sum, "and my materia medica."

"What's that?" inquired Val, pretending not to understand.

"The ship's medicine chest, greeny."

"Everything from paregoric to peppermint, I suppose," Cal remarked. "Hope you brought some seasick medicine for yourself."

By this time Val and Cal were hungry as bears. Sumner, who had already eaten, volunteered to help

Val prepare a meal for himself and the mate. This occupied some minutes, during which Val related to Sumner the odd happening of the night, much to that person's surprise and mystification.

Breakfast was soon disposed of. While the others ate, Sumner busied himself lashing the "hencoop" to a ring bolt on the forward deck, and in feeding the two occupants. In stormy weather he planned to put them below in the forepeak, and to keep spray from troubling them while on deck, he had arranged a piece of tarpaulin that could be fitted over the box.

The cruise regulations provided that the two watches should navigate the yacht on alternate days. Thus one day, Val, with Farleigh Hartwell, would assume that duty, and Cal with Sumner, the next. The captain would be in charge one day and the mate the next, though of course the authority of the captain superseded that of the mate, even on days when the latter was navigator, if the captain deemed the mate to be in error.

The watch that was not engaged in sailing cooked the meals and cleaned up the craft. In an emergency, also, they were obliged to render assistance to the navigating watch, which, for a while at least, might be highly expedient, since neither Sumner nor Hartwell were very well up in handling a sailboat, and it might take them some little time to get accustomed to handling ropes and sails in a seamanlike manner.

In this way a fair division of labor was to be made. There were also regulations providing for days on which the yacht might be detained in port, and for Sundays, on which it was not proposed to sail unless absolutely necessary.

But on this first day of the cruise, since Hartwell was not present, rules were temporarily suspended, the captain was in charge and each was to turn to as required by him.

Lighter and lighter grew the breeze. At ten it was a mere breath, but the "Spitfire," helped by the ebbing tide, edged farther and farther down the bay. Those familiar with the Atlantic coast are aware that Stroudport harbor is the innermost part of a large and beautiful island-dotted bay. So numerous, in fact, are these charming bits of land, that they are often referred to as the "three hundred and sixty-five islands." Many of them are covered with summer cottages; numerous steamer lines connect them with the city; and not a few of the islands have residents the year round.

Down among these islands the "Spitfire" was now threading her way. Ahead opened out a vista of blue channel, flanked on either side by rock and beach bordered shores, back of which rose picturesque grassy or wooded slopes, with cottages scattered here and there.

Aggravating as it was to have a calm at the very outset, yet it was pleasant to lounge in the shade of the big mainsail, and watch the busy life of the

islands so close at hand, the steamers plying to and fro, or to lay comfortably back and eye the clouds floating high overhead.

By noon the "Spitfire" had managed to poke her nose down past Long Island, but it was slow work, and unless the wind freshened soon the chances of reaching Harpsboro by night were not encouraging. The log showed that they had made eight miles in six hours, which was not very brisk traveling.

Sumner was now taking a trick at the tiller, though it needed slight attention, since the yacht was scarce making steerage way, and did little but drift with the tide. Sumner was absorbed in meditation. The summer calm was conducive to drowsiness, and Cal and Val were stretched at full length on the forward deck, snoozing.

Sumner's meditative mood rendered him rather oblivious to the yacht's course, slow though it was, or he would have noted that the tide was carrying them in dangerously close to Bones Island.

The shore of this island was a sandy beach, backed by a high bluff, and as the yacht drifted in closer, every breath of wind was cut off. The yacht was at the mercy of the tide, strong here, and before Sumner realized what was happening, the "Spitfire" swung rapidly inshore, and with a grating under her keel, stopped short.

"What are you doing?" Cal inquired, starting up. "Starboard your helm, or you'll have us ashore!"

"We're pretty close to land as it is," retorted Sum, with a grimace. "This tide has set us ashore quicker 'n a wink.

"Who'd have thought," he continued, leaving the now useless tiller, and peering over the side, "that the bottom was so near the top here?"

"Now she's off," he presently exclaimed, as, sighting by the island, he seemed to discern some motion in the craft. The "Spitfire" had run upon a jutting point, around which the tide ebbed rapidly.

"She's off nothing," Cal retorted, disgustedly. "She's only swinging a little in the tide. Let's see if we can't tug her off with the tender."

"Halloo! What's the row? Got to Harpsboro?" Val woke up and stared around.

"Well, not so you'd notice it," Cal retorted. "Sumner's run us ashore on Bones Island. We're going to try and tug her off with the tender. What do you think?"

Val took a comprehensive look about.

"Think," he replied, after glancing finally at his watch, "I don't think you can do it in a week of Sundays, till the tide turns. It's a quarter past twelve. Low tide at one-thirty to-day. We can start her off by three, anyhow. You certainly can't pull her ahead over the point, nor back against that current now. We'll have to let her set."

"Say, fellows," exclaimed Sumner, who during the dialogue had been scrutinizing the shore,

"there's slats of raspberry bushes on this island. I'll bet there's a pile of berries; why don't we have some?"

"Go ashore and get 'em," Val retorted. "I'll eat all you'll pick."

The word raspberries stirred Cal, also, for he was fond of the small fruit.

"Let's go ashore and see, Sum," he exclaimed, pulling in the tender.

"Yes, go ahead," said Val. "I'll look out for the yacht, and it has occurred to me that I want to open the log-book. When you get back we'll have dinner."

Cal and Sumner pulled away, leaving Val writing in a volume upon whose cover was inscribed "Log-book of the Sloop-yacht 'Spitfire.'"

The bluff near which the "Spitfire" was stranded appearing too steep to climb easily, the boys pulled round the point, looking for a better landing-place. Here they found evidences of life ashore. Back some rods from the water, in the edge of a grove, stood a farmhouse, and anchored in a snug cove was a small catboat. The cove had a smooth beach.

"We'll land in the cove," directed Cal. Sumner was at the oars, and pulled in the direction indicated; but they were still some ways from the landing-point when Cal saw the front door of the farmhouse open. A woman emerged and ran down toward the cove, beckoning as she did so. Soon reaching the edge of the bluff, she began to call.

"Help, quick! Help!"

"Halloo, what's the row?" questioned Sum, pausing to look around.

When the woman saw him stop rowing she began to beckon and call again. She appeared to be in a high state of excitement.

CHAPTER IV

CAL AND SUM RISE TO AN EMERGENCY

"SHE's hollering again," exclaimed Sumner, as he watched the movements of the woman at the top of the bluff. "What do you 'spose is the matter?"

"Mumps," replied Carroll, solemnly.

"Mumps?" repeated Sumner, inquiringly. "How do you know?"

"I don't know," Cal returned, laughing in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "How in the world can you expect me to? If you'll just give those oars a boost, perhaps we can find out what the matter is."

Sumner began rowing energetically.

"There's one thing it surely isn't," he ejaculated, in a tone of certainty.

"What's that?"

"Lock-jaw," was the sententious reply.

The tender soon grounded at the cove, just below the high bank on which stood the woman.

"What's the matter?" was Sumner's eager inquiry, but the woman cut him short.

"Don't come ashore!" she exclaimed, with great energy. "Don't dare to waste a single precious

minute! Mother's up to the house" — she jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the farmhouse — "and she's awfully sick, perhaps *dying!*

"O-o-o-oh! I want you to go straight over to Beeg Island and get a doctor to come over *immediately.* Tell him to *come at once.* Please go just as fast as you can! Take — take the sailboat if it will be any quicker."

This revelation of sudden and dire emergency threw Sumner into momentary gasping surprise, from which he recovered sufficiently to ask: —

"What shall we say is the matter with your mother, and who is it wants the doctor?"

"Mrs. Bones," was all the reply that came back, for the woman turned and ran back to the house, disappearing a moment later in the open doorway.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" declared Sum, gazing open-mouthed after the woman until she was lost to sight. "What shall we do?"

"Go to Beeg Island for the doctor, of course," retorted Cal, decidedly. "We can't leave the woman to die."

"No," responded his companion, slowly, "I suppose not — of course not, I mean. But who wants to row to Beeg Island and back for a doctor? It's every bit of four miles."

"The wind is freshening," exclaimed Cal, looking seaward. "See, out of the lee of the island the water is roughened by the breeze."

"Then we'd better take the sailboat," rejoined

Sumner. He pushed off, and headed for the sailboat, which was a twenty-foot cat-rigged affair.

"I'd like to know just what the matter is with her mother, anyhow," mused Sumner, thoughtfully, as he worked away at the oars.

"What good would it do you?"

"Maybe I could cure her myself, without going for the doctor," was the unlooked-for reply.

"There are lots of things I know how to doctor already," went on Sum, with great complacency, failing to note that Cal was on the verge of an explosion. "There's corns and bunions, warts, headache, stomach-ache, pinkeye, and a lot of other diseases that I forget the names of now."

"What a pity you didn't tell Mrs. Bones so when you had the chance," retorted Cal, and then he burst into a loud guffaw.

Sumner gazed at him with disgust. He turned and grasped the gunwale of the catboat, which they had now reached, and clambered aboard, muttering sourly: —

"Come, get in here lively, if you ever want to get that doctor."

The catboat was a neat centerboard craft, decked over forward, with a little cuddy amidships, and a cozy cockpit big enough to hold half a dozen people. "Molly Mook" was the name on the stern. She was moored to a buoy, and to free her it was simply necessary to uncatch a spring hook at the bow. The rowboat was fastened to the buoy, since they

did not care to drag it to Beeg Island and back. Up went the sail, the mooring line was cast off, and under the influence of the freshening breeze the "Molly Mook" stood out of the cove.

Out of the lee of the bluff the wind came still more briskly, and a few moments later Val Brandon was surprised to behold a sailboat approaching around the point whence a short time before the rowboat had gone, and when it had come within hailing distance, to hear Cal's familiar tones.

"There's a woman sick on the island. We're going over to Beeg Island for a doctor."

"All right. Good luck," called back the skipper of the "Spitfire," readily grasping the situation. The catboat went about, and sped off before the wind, with Beeg Island landing dead ahead across a two-mile strip of water. Beeg Island was quite a summer resort, and the steamer landing was the nearest approach to a large cottage settlement. This seemed to be the most likely place to find a physician, and was the boys' objective point.

Scarcely were his chums out of hail when Val was attracted by a call from the shore. The woman who had sent Cal and Sum on their errand came running along the bluff, waving her hands and calling: —

"Stop! Come back!"

Arriving opposite the "Spitfire" she halted, and having paused a moment to regain her breath, hailed the sloop's captain.

"Do you know those boys in the sailboat?"

Val replied in the affirmative.

"Tell them they needn't go after the doctor," was the surprising request. "We don't need him. Tell them to come back."

"But," began Val, with an amused smile on his face, "they've gone too far ——"

But Mrs. Bones was gone also, hurrying back in the direction she had come, and Val found himself talking to the bluff.

"She seems to take me for a telephone," he laughed, turning again to the log-book.

Meanwhile the "Molly Mook" was skimming over the water like a swallow.

"Gee, whiz!" exclaimed Sumner, admiringly, noting her speed. "Doesn't she smoke through it, though!"

"You'd think so if you had to steer," retorted Cal, hugging the tiller hard, for the "Molly Mook," like all cat-rigged boats, carried a strong weather helm when running before the wind, and every pound of wind on the canvas made itself felt at the tiller.

"Here comes the Harpsboro steamer, the 'Merryconeag,'" Sumner presently announced, looking back towards Bones Island. "She's right after us, and going to touch at Beeg, too. Bet you the sodas we get there ahead. What do you say?"

Cal glanced back at the steamer, which was just passing the spot where the "Spitfire" lay stuck in the sand.

"Agreed," he retorted. "You'll pay for the refreshments, and I'll need them, for this wind makes steering a tedious strain."

"Let me steer her awhile, then," said Sumner, "and give you a little rest. I never steered a catboat in my life, and I'd like to learn how."

"Yes," Cal ejaculated, with a sly grimace, "and run us ashore again."

"Oh, let up!" replied Sumner, indignantly. "There's nothing between here and the landing to go ashore on."

"Come down here, then, and take a turn at it. I warn you you'll get enough in about two minutes."

Sumner took the tiller, and under Cal's instructions kept the "Molly Mook" on her course. Steadily the steamer gained upon them. As the minutes elapsed, it became evident that the outcome of the race would be close. Five minutes later the "Merryconeag" had drawn so close that it was clear she would leave them astern before their destination was reached. The wind still held steady, however, and the "Molly Mook" was showing her best paces to the group of passengers on the steamer's forward deck, now so near that it was almost possible to distinguish faces.

"Blow, blow, ye winds," groaned Sumner, in mock despair; "and save me the price of two good sodas."

Unexpectedly came the answer to his entreaty. The wind of a sudden became flawy. The steamer



"WITH A CRY OF ALARM CAL SPRANG TO HIS PLACE, AND TRIED TO BRING THE 'MOLLY MOOK' INTO THE WIND."

still gained rapidly. Now she was almost upon them. The "Molly Mook" rocked from side to side in the deep sea swell, and without warning a side gust of wind jibed the sail.

Before Sumner had time to draw his breath he was appalled to see the boom rise in the air and sweep viciously over his head. The sail jibed with a snap that threatened to capsize the craft, or take her mast out; the sheet came taut against the steersman with a force that threw him violently back against the coaming and gave him a sore back that he did not get rid of for a week, while the gaff literally wrapped the sail around the mast.

Sumner was brushed from the tiller. With a cry of alarm Cal sprang to his place, and tried to bring the "Molly Mook" into the wind. Paying not the slightest attention to her tiller, the catboat went into irons, and drifted directly off into the path of the steamer. The "Merryconeag" was not over fifty feet distant, and coming at full speed.

CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERIOUS OVERCOAT

When Carroll Morse found that the catboat would pay no attention to her helm, he glanced around apprehensively at the steamer. He was horrified to see her about to cut the "Molly Mook" in two. He gave utterance to a fierce cry, which the passengers on the "Merryconeag" took up.

Clang, clang, went the engine room gong. The propeller churned violently on the reverse; the steamer's wheel went hard down, and an instant later her bow swept close past the catboat's stern — so close that the swell threw the little sailboat against the steamer's side as she slid past; and so suddenly did the whole thing happen that Cal and Sum had time to do nothing but hold on. Then the "Merryconeag" was past, and they lay, as before, with the "Molly Mook" in irons, and her gaff twisted around the mast.

"Well, I'll be gumswizzled!" ejaculated Sumner, as soon as he could find utterance.

"Never mind that," adjured Cal, half angrily. "Take an oar and help me get the boat's head to the wind."

By dint of some hard work, the catboat's head was brought to the wind, the gaff dropped back to its proper position, and matters assumed their normal condition. After hastily putting a reef in the sail to prevent a recurrence of the mishap, Cal once more headed the "Molly Mook" for the landing. Sumner had lost all desire to steer, and sat subdued until the wharf was reached. Then he volunteered to go ashore and find the physician.

He had no difficulty in persuading Cal to accept his offer, for it was warm ashore, and none could tell how long a hunt would be necessary before a doctor was forthcoming. Sum was glad to feel solid earth under him once more, and hurried up the wharf, leaving Cal to make a discovery.

Flung in a heap under the seat of the "Molly Mook's" standing room was a light brown summer overcoat. It lay there loosely, as though thrown into its present position with considerable force. With idle curiosity Cal picked it up and examined it.

It was an expensively made coat, and cut for a good-sized man.

"That coat was not here when we left Bones Island," mused Cal, wonderingly. "I *know* it was not. But where did it drop from?"

There was a single possibility. Possibly it had fallen from the Harpsboro steamer. The "Merryconeag" had now disappeared among the islands down the harbor, and inquiry there was impossible; but as Cal sat thinking the matter over, the more he

became convinced that the coat could have come into the boat in no other way.

When the steamer encountered the sailboat, there had been a great flurry among the passengers on deck, and doubtless in the excitement some man leaning over for a better view had inadvertently lost his overcoat off his arm, or allowed it to slip unnoticed from the rail, and by chance it had fallen into the "Molly Mook's" standing room. This was Cal's line of reasoning, and for want of a better, it seemed satisfactory.

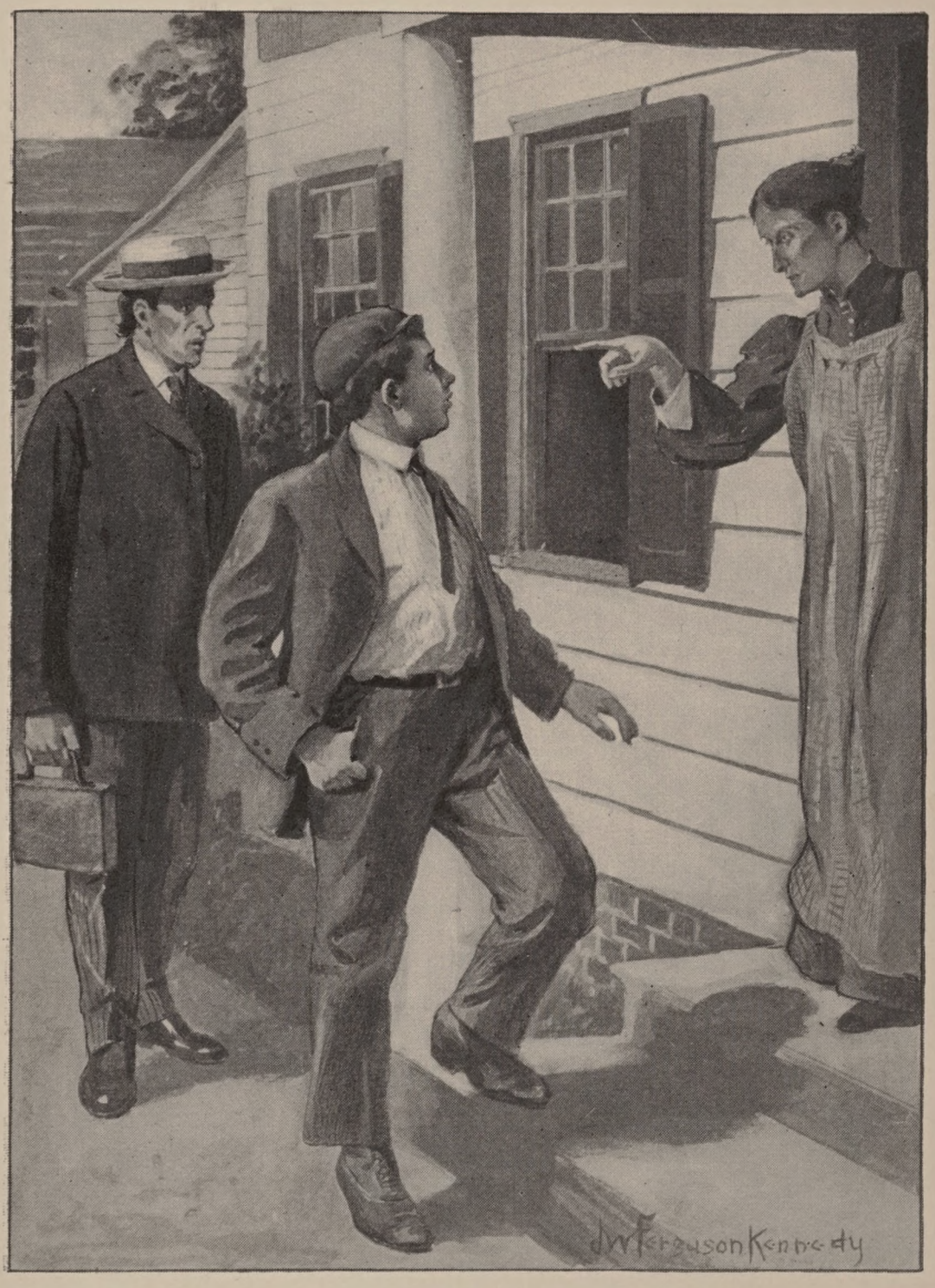
There seemed to be nothing in the pockets save a handkerchief. This had a "B" in a corner. With this exception, in the brief inspection he made at this time, Cal discovered nothing offering a clue to the ownership of the overcoat.

Half an hour elapsed before Sumner appeared with the physician, the latter carrying a medicine case. The Doctor was a tall, gaunt specimen of humanity, who gave his name as Pilsingham. Thin and cadaverous, he appeared to be in the last stages of consumption, and throughout his entire trip to Bones Island and back, never smiled.

"What a funereal looking old cove," Sumner smuggled in a whisper to Cal when the physician's back was turned. "Wonder if he does undertaking, too."

"Yes," returned Cal, with a twinkle in his eyes, "and gets a double profit out of his practice."

The wind still blew steadily from the southwest;



"'WELL, YOU CAN TAKE HIM RIGHT STRAIGHT BACK AGAIN.'"

the "Molly Mook" made two long reaches and one short one, and came to her anchorage at Bones Island inside of half an hour. During this time Cal, his attention taken up with the management of the catboat, said nothing to Sumner regarding the mysterious overcoat, preferring to broach the matter when there was more opportunity for discussion.

Cal stayed aboard to make everything snug, while Sum took the Doctor ashore and conducted him to the farmhouse. His knock was answered by the woman who had sent them on their errand, and who had given the name of "Mrs. Bones."

"I have brought Dr. Pilsingham, Mrs. Bones," began Sumner. "I hope it isn't too late to ——"

"Well, you can take him right straight back again," was the astonishing reply, delivered in acid tones. "I don't need any doctor, and I won't have one. I thought mother had taken some poison medicine, and was dying, but I found she hadn't, and was only asleep. I told the other fellow" — she made a gesture in a direction which Sumner vaguely surmised indicated the "Spitfire"—"to tell you to come back. You can take your doctor right straight back where you got him. *I* don't want him, and don't propose to pay doctor's bills when there's no earthly need."

And she slammed the door in their faces.

Sumner gave a whistle of amazement. The Doctor looked vexed. There was little to be said, and

neither said it, but walked silently to the shore and rowed back to the "Molly Mook."

Everything was snug, so Cal entered the tender with the overcoat on his arm, and they rowed around to the "Spitfire," while Sumner related the reception that Mrs. Bones had accorded them. The Doctor sat on the bow thwart and looked glum.

As Sum proceeded with his brief narrative, Cal's face gradually relaxed until he was laughing uproariously.

"What a set of guys that old woman made of us," he declared, as soon as he could speak. "That's the best joke I have heard for ages."

The Doctor stirred indignantly.

"I don't suppose," he began, half hesitatingly, "I don't suppose it's any use asking you gentlemen to reimburse me for my time and trouble in coming to this forsaken place?"

He rubbed his hands together dubiously.

Cal grew red in the face from the force of his pent feelings.

"Not the least in the world," he finally blurted out.

"We'll give you half our profits in the trip," retorted Sumner, to whom the whole affair had now assumed the aspect of a gigantic joke. "Give you one half of all we get out of it."

Dr. Pilsingham turned his eyes eagerly on Sumner for a moment; then straightened up in sudden dignity.

A minute later the tender ran up to the "Spitfire," and the Doctor was first to clamber aboard. As he did so Cal began a fierce muttering — though so low the physician could not catch it.

"Cheek — the cheekiest cheek!"

"Well, I don't know," rejoined Sumner, with a grin. "I think the woman who had the mother who didn't take the poison and didn't die had the purest, unadulteratedest cheek of the whole shooting match."

Val was in the midst of dinner preparations, but he paused to receive an introduction to the Doctor. That worthy thereupon pulled a newspaper from his pocket, and proceeded to bury himself in its contents, while Sumner graphically portrayed to Val the trip to Beeg, and Mrs. Bones' reception. Cal quietly began overhauling once more the overcoat that had come so strangely into his possession.

"Where'd you get that coat?" demanded Sumner, presently, having completed his story.

"Ever see it before?" queried Cal, leisurely holding it up to view.

"Yes; saw it on the catboat. Whose is it?"

"When did you first see it?"

"When we started back from Beeg Island."

"Was it in the boat before we encountered the steamer?" asked Cal, now speaking eagerly.

"No," was Sum's decided response. "I don't recall seeing it until I came back with Dr. Pilsingham."

"Well," returned Cal, slowly, "I found it flung under the cockpit seat just after you left me; but I could swear it wasn't in the boat when we started from Bones Island, or I should not have brought it here."

"Could it have fallen from the steamer?" asked Val, becoming interested. "Were you near enough for such a thing to be possible?"

"Near enough!" retorted Sumner, with mild sarcasm. "We were so near we might have climbed aboard if we hadn't been paralyzed. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts the coat fell from the steamer. Come now."

"I see no other possible explanation," was Cal's quiet response. "But tell me," he continued, "what you make of this."

He pulled a slip of paper from an inside pocket of the overcoat.

"That's a queer place for a pocket," Val said, as his eyes followed Cal's action.

The pocket was sewed to the inside of the lining, near the bottom of the coat, and as the lining was unfastened at the bottom, it could be easily reached if one was aware of its existence. It was a deft piece of work that Cal had just stumbled on by the merest accident.

The slip of paper contained a few lines scrawled unevenly in lead pencil:—

"Jot: Dug up evergreen plant Sunday night. Just your size. Load 'Rover' at Stevens' to-night, one."

The piece of paper went the rounds of the trio, and Cal sat down and leaned against the coaming, with an odd look in his eyes.

"Know what it means?" Val asked.

"Wish I did," returned Cal.

"Fudge!" Sum ejaculated. "I call that dead easy."

"Well," said Cal, "tell us about it."

"It means," said Sumner, triumphantly, "that the fellow dug up some evergreen shrubbery Sunday night, which is just what this Jot wants; and he's going to load his dog at one o'clock to-night."

"And when the dog is nicely loaded, will he go and shoot some one with it?" inquired Cal, as an amused smile played over his face.

"I didn't see anything about a dog," said Val, picking up the coat and inspecting it curiously.

"Didn't you see the word Rover?" retorted Sum, anxious to uphold his theory.

"Yes," was Val's absent response. He was thinking of something else.

"Well, that's the dog."

Carroll uttered a loud laugh, whereat Sumner fell upon him in mock wrath, and gave him a mild thumping.

"Jerusalem!" Val ejaculated, a moment later. "Now we know who owns the coat."

"Who?" demanded Cal and Sum, starting up instantly.

"Here's the owner's name just where the tailor

put it," replied Val, holding out the coat for his mates to see. Some tailors make a practice of attaching to each garment of their manufacture the name of the customer and date of making. Val had discovered this under a fold of cloth just beneath the hanging strap.

"Maj. E. J. Bangs, May 189–" read Sumner, aloud. "Why — why — he was on the yacht that backed out of the dock on us ——"

"The 'Sea Rover,'" interjected Cal, his eyes growing big.

"His second name is Jotham, 'Jot' for short," added Val. "And I don't think 'Rover' means a dog."

"You bet it doesn't!" exclaimed Sumner, energetically. "It means the yacht."

"And the whole thing means — what?" Val gazed seriously from Cal to Sumner, and back again.

Sumner's eyes suddenly shone with the light of a new idea.

"I have it," he almost shouted. "It means this.

"Major E. J. Bangs: dug up evergreen shrubbery Sunday night. It's just what you want. Will load it on the 'Sea Rover' at Stevens' Wharf to-night at one o'clock."

"That's nearer correct," Val said quietly, "but I tell you, fellows, we aren't anywhere near the bottom of this thing yet."

"I think there is a good deal more hidden in the note," returned Cal. "Why, for instance, in the

name of common sense, should any one make so much of a mystery about a mess of evergreen shrubbery?"

"Well, we know that a box was loaded on a steamer at Stevens' Wharf at one o'clock this morning," returned Val, his brows contracted, as was his habit when matters perplexed him.

"Was there any shrubbery in that box?" inquired Cal, with a tinge of sarcasm.

"I don't think," retorted Val. "Too heavy. But what in creation *is* this 'evergreen plant'?"

"And why should they dig it up on Sunday *night?*" broke in Sumner.

"And pay a man a hundred dollars for the job, and caution him to keep mum?" Cal queried, mystified.

These and many other questions that none could answer followed each other in quick succession, until Val finally capped the climax.

"One thing is sure, fellows, I recognize the familiar voice on the steamer last night."

"Whose was it?" Cal asked. "Not——"

"That's just whose it was," anticipated Val. "Bangs!"

"But Bangs is camping out at Pod Island," objected Cal.

"He's doing lots of things nowadays, it would appear," was the sententious reply, "but this is neither eating dinner nor getting to Harpsboro."

He turned suddenly to resume dinner preparations, and encountered the eager gaze of the physician, who

had been completely forgotten by the trio in their eager discussion. Manifestly the Doctor had been an interested listener to the conversation regarding the mysterious note. He dropped his eyes abruptly when he found himself observed, and retired again behind the newspaper.

Dinner was soon ready. The Doctor, at Val's invitation, joined them, and all fell to with a relish.

Dr. Pilsingham at first appeared nervous and reserved, but under the influence, apparently, of good food and lively conversation, he thawed considerably. He finally condescended to inquire the identity of his entertainers, and the plan of their cruise, and even ascertained that they purposed to stop that night at Harpsboro to pick up Farleigh Hartwell.

Scarcely was the repast ended when the rising tide started the "Spitfire" from the sand-bar. The wind still holding fresh, less than half an hour enabled the "Spitfire" to land the Doctor at Beeg Island landing. As the physician's lank figure clambered to the top of the wharf, Sumner improved the opportunity to snap his pocket kodak at the person who had played a considerable part in the day's happenings.

"I'll bet he actually half believes we put up a job on him, and that the Bones Island business was a hoax," Cal chuckled, as he watched the long-limbed disciple of Æsculapius stride away.

The sloop had hauled out from the landing, and was running free down the channel before Val gave

utterance to a remark that was virtually a reply to Cal's statement.

"Hoax or not, I'll bet that Doctor could tell something about the 'evergreen plant' if he tried."

"Why?" demanded his chums in a breath.

"Because I caught him looking at us with a very odd expression on his face just as we wound up our discussion about the note."

This was a fresh subject for speculation, and lasted for some time — until, in fact, the wind died again to a breath, and left the yacht rolling lazily on the glassy swell between Hope and Pod islands, three miles from Beeg landing, and still a considerable distance from Harpsboro.

The Beeg Island landing, however, was not visible from where they lay, near the southern extremity of Pod Island, owing to the fact that Hope Island — which they had been obliged to skirt, — lay in the way.

"That confounded Mrs. Bones queered things for us," grumbled Sumner, who lay on his back on the forward deck, watching the flapping sails. "If she hadn't taken up so much time, we could have got to Harpsboro before the wind died."

"How could she have bothered us if we hadn't run ashore on her island?" slyly queried Cal.

"There'll be no Harpsboro to-night, my hearties," announced the captain, before this discussion could get under way.

"What'll we do?" asked Sumner.

"Run into that little cove on Pod Island shore, and anchor for the night. Possibly, though, if the wind comes up after supper, we can run down by moonlight.

"Mr. Morse," he continued, in a commanding tone.

"Sir?" replied Cal, saluting.

"The starboard watch will clear away the tender, get out a bowline, and tow the yacht into the cove ahead."

"Very good, sir."

These instructions were carried out, while Val lowered and furled the sails. A quarter of an hour later the yacht let go an anchor in a small, well-sheltered cove near the southern end of Pod Island, within stone's throw of a narrow beach and the dense growth of trees that grew down to it.

A brook that fell in a miniature waterfall down the side of a jutting ledge, and emptied into the cove, attracted Val's attention. To save the supply already on board, he instructed Sumner to go ashore with the small jug, and fill it at the brook, if that water seemed fit to drink.

Shortly after Sumner returned with a full jug, and highly excited.

"Say," he exclaimed, in a suppressed tone, as he clambered aboard, "who do you think I saw on shore?"

"Oh, the President of the United States, probably," returned Cal, indifferently.

"No, sir," was Sum's unlooked-for response, "it was Dr. Pilsingham, skulking among the trees, watching us."

If a bombshell had dropped in the midst of the cove it could hardly have caused more surprise than this declaration.

CHAPTER VI

THE MAJOR CALLS FOR HIS OVERCOAT, AND SUMNER HAS A MISADVENTURE

In fact, so great was the impression produced by Sumner's declaration that Dr. Pilsingham — whom they had left not long since at Beeg Island — was skulking among the trees on Pod Island, watching them, that it elicited expressions of incredulity from his mates.

"You are certainly dreaming, Sum," was Carroll's decided response. "We left the Doctor at Beeg not more than three hours ago. How could he get here without our knowing it?"

"It's some one else, of course," exclaimed Val, his excitement subsiding at this idea. "A case of mistaken identity."

"As sure as I stand here it was the Doctor," Sumner declared, with deep earnestness. "I could tell him a mile."

"What was he doing?" asked Cal, who was helping Val get supper.

"Just as I climbed the ledge to fill the jug from the brook, there was a loud snapping of twigs in the woods close by. I caught sight of a face peering out — the Doctor's face, I tell you — and it

disappeared like a flash a moment later. Then he hurried off through the woods as fast as he could."

"Which way?"

"North, I should judge."

"If it is the Doctor, what is he doing here?" queried Cal.

"It *is* the Doctor, I tell you," Sum stoutly reiterated.

"Then why is he afraid to show himself?" asked Val. "Hasn't the Doctor as good a right on Pod Island as we?"

"Don't ask *me* to explain it," retorted Sumner, "but I believe it has something to do with the 'evergreen mystery.'"

"Great Scott!" was Val's explosive ejaculation. "Perhaps you are right. Boys, I'm going ashore to see if that is the Doctor!"

"I'm with you, then," declared the mate of the "Spitfire," dropping the supper preparations.

"If it is possible to get any light on this funny business, I propose to get it," Cal added, as he hurriedly followed Val into the tender.

"I'll put you ashore, fellows, and then finish getting supper," declared Sumner, highly elated at the prospect of a little excitement. "Keep to the north through the woods, or along the shore, and you ought to come across the Doctor somewhere."

Sumner landed his mates, and they plunged hastily into the woods. Then he returned to the

yacht, and took up the supper preparations, which were not very far advanced.

"The Major's camp is on this island," he mused, as he dodged into the cabin for the egg pail and the skillet. "I wonder where it is, and if the boys will come across it?"

The oil stove had been previously placed on the cockpit seat. Cal had lighted it, and with the intention of making corn chowder, had placed a small kettle over it. The can of corn, unopened, he had thoughtlessly put inside the kettle, and in the excitement of going ashore to look for the supposed Doctor, allowed it to remain.

For the time being Sum paid no attention to it. He decided that scrambled eggs would go well after the day's work. Unconscious of the fact that the kettle was getting hot over the stove, and that the can within it was absorbing a goodly portion of the heat, Sumner placed the skillet on the cockpit seat opposite the stove, pulled half a dozen eggs from the pail, wiped off the sawdust, and deposited them in the skillet.

An unexpected hail came from the shore.

"Yacht ahoy!"

Hastily setting down the egg pail, Sum looked about him. The cove was nearly circular in shape, with an entrance perhaps fifty feet in width between two curving promontories. The northernmost of these was little more than a sandy spit, without trees. On the extremity of this two men were standing. They repeated the hail.

"Halloo the shore," responded Sum, and muttered to himself, "We won't have to hunt far for the Major, for here he is."

Sumner did not, however, recognize the Major's companion.

"Is that Brandon's yacht?" called Bangs.

"Yes," responded Sum. "Is that Major Bangs?"

"That's just who it is," was the reply. "I wish to see you, Mr. Brandon."

"After his overcoat, likely," muttered Sumner, under his breath.

"Brandon isn't here."

"Isn't there?" queried Bangs, evincing some surprise. He was not more than a hundred feet distant, and in the calm it was comparatively easy to carry on conversation.

"No, he is not here," retorted Sumner, rather shortly.

"Where is he, then?" persisted Bangs. "I want to see him."

"He's gone away," was the indefinite answer.

"When will he be back?"

"Oh, sometime before morning, I guess. What do you want, anyhow?"

"Who is talking?" asked Bangs, fidgeting about on the edge of the sand spit.

"Parker."

"Well, Mr. Parker," went on Bangs, in a persuasive tone, "do you know anything about an overcoat of mine—a light brown one?"

"Is that your overcoat we picked up?" said Sum, in simulated surprise. "How did you know we had it?"

"If you'll kindly bring it over here, Mr. Parker," responded the Major, "I'll tell you all about it."

Sumner knew of no reason why the coat should not be returned to its owner, and since Bangs promised an explanation that might throw some light on a mystery, he lost no time in getting the garment from the cabin, and setting himself ashore in the tender. The note had been returned to the secret pocket, after Val had taken a copy of it, in the hope that sometime this perplexing matter might be explained.

Major Bangs recognized the yachtsman before he was halfway to land.

"Think I saw you yesterday, Mr. Parker," he exclaimed pleasantly, as the boat grounded.

"Did you lose the coat off the 'Merryconeag'?" began Sum, as he passed the garment to its owner.

"Yes; were you in the sailboat that we came so near running down?"

Sumner replied in the affirmative, and then went on:

"But I fail to see how you knew we had the coat. Did you know that it fell overboard into the sailboat?"

"Hadn't the faintest idea of such a thing," laughed the Major. "To be honest with you, I did not miss it till the steamer had passed Beeg Island. But I had an attack of my old enemy, heart disease, shortly after landing here, about the middle of the

afternoon. My friend Jones ran over to Beeg in his steam-yacht for my doctor, Pilsingham, and brought him over to attend me. He was the man who told me you had my coat."

"That accounts for it," exclaimed Sumner. "I wondered how you knew. The Doctor made good time getting over here, for we left him at Beeg Island ourselves about three o'clock."

"So he said—in fact, that is how he knew you had the coat, through being on your yacht. He reached here not later than five o'clock.

"There goes the yacht back with him now," he continued, suddenly pointing out across the channel that separated Pod and Hope islands. A steam-yacht was gliding westward, a short distance from the group. Sumner recognized the "Sea Rover."

"I say, Patterson, there's your chance to get over to Beeg and take the last regular steamer up from the city to-night.

"Mr. Patterson has just received word of the serious illness of his only son," added Bangs, in a low tone.

"Can't you hail her?" queried Bangs' companion, anxiously scrutinizing the yacht. "If it's a possible thing I must reach the city to-night."

The Major put two fingers to his lips and gave vent to three penetrating whistles — whistles that might have been heard a mile away.

The yacht answered by three toots, and slowing down, swept around in a broad curve and headed for the cove.

Sumner watched her approach with considerable interest. He wondered if the "evergreen plant" was still aboard. But at the same time he cast furtive glances at Bangs, who was fumbling at the pockets of his overcoat, in apparent absent-mindedness. When he thought no one was looking the Major reached for the secret pocket, and a distinct look of satisfaction appeared on his features when he discovered the mysterious missive still there. Laying the coat over his arm, he slowly and with apparent carelessness tore the note into minute fragments, and threw them into the water.

A short distance offshore the yacht came to a stop. A man with a big nose hailed from the forward deck.

"What do you want?"

"Would like to have you take a gentleman over to Beeg Island for me," called the Major.

"Certainly. Will you send him aboard, or shall we send a boat?"

"Get into my boat, Mr. Patterson," said Sumner. "I'll set you aboard."

"I'll be greatly obliged to you," replied the Alderman to Sum's proposal, stepping into the tender. "Good-by, Major. I am sorry to be forced to leave you so soon."

"And I am no less sorry to lose you, Patterson," returned Bangs, with a great show of sympathy. "Our camp-out together has started in poorly; but I hope you'll find the lad O.K. when you get home.

"Come back just as soon as you possibly can," he continued, walking along the shore as the boat forged ahead. "And you, Mr. Parker, since you won't find me here on your return, let me give you many thanks for the overcoat, and your kindness in putting my friend aboard the yacht. Remember me to your companions, and tell them not to forget my camp is on Pod Island. My latch-string is always out."

Bangs disappeared among the trees. The tender shot out through the inlet, and was soon alongside the "Sea Rover."

With many thanks, and an offer of payment — which Sumner refused — Alderman Patterson clambered aboard the steam-yacht. The man with the big nose came along and gave the Alderman an assisting hand. The yacht at once backed off and resumed her course, while Sumner rowed leisurely back, reflecting upon what had just occurred.

Still cogitating, he made the tender fast once more, and stepped into the cockpit to resume supper preparations. The moment he reached the center of the standing room there came a sudden loud report from the direction of the oil stove. It sent all his cogitations flying.

A roar like a small cannon sounded in his ears. He staggered back, confused, and as a shower of hot canned corn descended upon him, he half sat, half fell, plump into the skillet containing the eggs.

CHAPTER VII

THE "SEA ROVER" REPORTS BAD NEWS

THE can of corn, reposing quietly on the lighted oil stove, had thought it time to make its presence both known and felt. Having appropriated a large share of the heat emitted by the stove, it had gotten up a very creditable amount of steam pressure.

Just at the moment Sumner set foot in the standing room, the pressure became too great for the tin, and with a report like a small cannon the top of the can was blown skyward, followed by the greater portion of the corn, which promptly fell again in a shower upon Sumner and the yacht.

When he recovered from his momentary surprise, Sumner found himself physically unhurt, with the exception of sundry hot spots on his hands from the scalding corn. But, oh, those eggs!

They had crackled loudly as he sat down, but he knew that great as had been the damage done them, the damage done his duck trousers was still greater. Rising gingerly from his seat in the skillet, with egg-shells dropping and yellow yolks making fantastic stripes down his trouser legs in obedience to the law of gravitation, he started for a towel to wipe away the wreck.

At this inopportune moment there came a hail from the shore. Val and Cal had returned.

"Yes, I'll come for you in a minute. Just hold on, won't you?"

He wiped away as much of the dripping egg as he could, and without stopping for further repairs pulled the tender ashore and took aboard his mates.

"Who fired that gun?" was Val's first query.

"Yes," went on Cal, curiously, "did you just fire off the cannon?"

"You'll think a cannon has been fired when you get aboard," responded Sum, ruefully. "The next time you go off and leave a tight can of corn or anything else on a lighted stove, just notify me, please, so I can stand from under."

"By George!" exclaimed Cal. "Did I leave that can on the stove?"

"I should rather say yes."

"And it blew up?"

"Well, somewhat so. Just look at me."

Sumner stood up and revolved before his mates.

"What *have* you got on you?" Val asked.

"Egg," replied Sumner, laconically.

"Did the eggs blow up, too?" queried Cal, beginning to smile. "I didn't leave any eggs in the kettle."

"The eggs were in the skillet," retorted Sumner, rather glumly.

"I don't see where the eggs came in," Val exclaimed wonderingly.

"They didn't come *in*, Val, they came *on*," re-

torted Cal, mischievously. "I'll bet a cent that when the corn can exploded Sumner sat down in the skillet. Isn't that so, Sum?"

"Pretty near," was Sumner's reluctant admission, "but ——"

But nothing more was necessary to convulse his chums with laughter. The gingerly manner in which Sumner sat upon the thwart, his sour expression, added to the appearance of his ducks, left nothing wanting to raise a laugh that rang long and loud, and when they boarded the yacht, Cal shook so that he nearly fell into the water.

"The yacht looks as though she had suffered from a *corn*nonade," he said, after a critical stare about, as soon as he regained breath. And then Val and Cal roared again, while Sumner presently concluded to take it all in good part, and laughed as vociferously as his chums, for it *was* comical, even though he was the butt of the joke.

"But why didn't you take the can off the stove, Sum?" inquired Cal, when he had pulled himself together and began to clean up the scattered contents of the exploded can.

"Because I was interrupted before I had time to see it. Major Bangs called for his overcoat. By the way, did you find the Doctor?"

Sumner was changing his trousers. He suddenly recalled the object of the boys' errand ashore, and paused in the operation of adjusting a suspender strap to make his inquiry.

"Not a sign of him," said Val, who had again taken up the supper preparations. "We found the Major's camp locked up, on the other side of the island; but not a soul anywhere that we went."

"You said Bangs came for his coat," reminded Cal. "Did you give it to him, and what did he say?"

Sumner related his encounter with Bangs and Alderman Patterson. His excellent memory enabled him to repeat the conversation almost verbatim. Bangs' appearance, his companion, his demand for the overcoat, and his explanation of the source of his knowledge regarding its whereabouts — in fact, every detail of the whole affair was carefully gone over by the trio, and thoughtfully weighed in a vain endeavor to fathom what they now termed the "evergreen mystery."

The talk lasted through supper, and for an hour after, while they sat at ease in the gathering dusk. It was close upon nine o'clock when Cal wound up the subject by suddenly exclaiming:—

"Jinks, but that's very funny!"

"What's funny?"

"That the Major's 'old enemy' should be heart disease, when he was well enough six months ago to get insured for a hundred thousand dollars. Eh, Val?"

"Great smoke!" exclaimed the skipper. "Did he say he had heart trouble, Sum?"

"That's what."

"He didn't have it when he took out the insur-

ance, or the company would not have issued the policy," said Val.

"And yet it's his 'old enemy,'" added Sumner.

"And that's what is funny," concluded Cal, with decision.

"Well?" said Val and Sum, in a breath.

"I think Major Bangs is a curious man," retorted Cal. "That's all."

The conversation went no farther, for Cal jumped to his feet, and, with an exclamation, pointed out toward the channel.

In the obscurity loomed up a black mass flanked on one side by a green light and on the other by a red one. The sound of a churning propeller was audible. The black mass approached rapidly.

"Perhaps it's the 'Sea Rover' coming back from Beeg," said Val, carelessly.

"She seems to be running straight for us," added Sum, wonderingly.

The approaching craft presently slowed down, and came to a stop a short distance off the cove, though the gloom was too great to allow the boys to determine her identity. Next came the sound of oars, and a few moments later a rowboat containing two persons entered the cove, and pulled straight for the yacht.

"Is that Brandon's yacht?" asked one of the occupants of the rowboat, as that craft came alongside the "Spitfire." The man in the stern seemed to be doing the talking.

"Yes," replied Val. "What do you want?"

"One of your fellows is aboard our yacht, and he is in pretty bad shape," was the astonishing reply.

"You are mistaken," replied Val. "Our party are all here."

The rowboat was now close alongside, and the man at the tiller reached for the yacht's gunwale. Both of the newcomers were strangers.

"We picked up a man fifteen minutes ago in the channel," continued the spokesman. "He was clinging to an upturned boat, one arm broken, and just on the point of giving up. He managed to call loud enough for our lookout to hear, and we pulled him in. He says his name is Hartwell — Farleigh Hartwell."

"There must be some mistake," said Cal, promptly, unwilling to believe such unpleasant news. "Farleigh Hartwell is waiting for us at Harpsboro."

"All we know is what he says himself," retorted the man in the rowboat, with some impatience. "Our boat is the 'Sea Rover.' When he said he was out looking for you, we came at once to notify you. He wants you to come aboard."

"Two of us can go," said Val, quietly. "Who shall it be?"

"You and Cal go," urged Sumner. "I don't mind staying by the yacht."

"We'll take the whole three of you," said the

spokesman. "We've plenty of room here. All come along."

"It's our rule not to leave the yacht alone at night," responded Val. "Come on, Cal."

"What's to harm your craft if you leave her for half an hour?" inquired the stranger as the two boys stepped into the rowboat.

"We don't know, and that's why we are going to leave a man aboard of her," said Val, with decision. "We'll probably be back before long, Sum," he added.

"If we should decide to take Hartwell to a doctor before bringing back your mates," broke in the spokesman in the boat, addressing Sumner, "don't you worry."

The boat pushed off, and was presently swallowed up in the dusk that hovered over the channel. The sound of voices soon told Sumner that the yacht had been reached. Then he heard the engine room gong sound, the propeller began to churn, and the black mass that represented the "Sea Rover" grew smaller and smaller until it became invisible.

"They must have decided to go for the doctor while they were rowing out," muttered Sum, with a lump rising in his throat, as he noted the promptness with which the yacht had started. "Poor Farleigh!"

If the steamer went to Beeg for the doctor, it was impossible to say how long it would be before his chums returned. Sumner lighted and set in place

at the masthead the usual night light, and then settled himself by the cabin lamp with a favorite sea story. He finally fell asleep. When he awoke and looked at his watch, it was half-past ten o'clock.

"The boys ought to be back," he muttered, rising and going into the cockpit to reconnoiter. There were no signs of the "Sea Rover." The dusk was now intensified by clouds that overcast the sky and obscured the moon. The wind had risen and blew fitfully. Its chilly dampness made Sumner shiver. After an exhaustive stare around, he prepared to reenter the cabin, when his ear caught a faint cry.

"Help! Help!"

Hardly audible, it came from out in the channel. In an instant Sumner was wide awake. He listened intently for a repetition, and it soon came, faintly as before.

"Help!"

Sumner sprang into the tender.

"There's some one in trouble out there," he muttered, as he hastily unfastened the painter. "I'm going to investigate, as sure as my name is Sumner Parker!"

CHAPTER VIII

SUMNER ENCOUNTERS ADVENTURES

SUMNER PARKER shipped the oars and sent the tender out through the inlet into the channel. Though he knew little of practical yacht sailing, in a rowboat he was thoroughly at home. His strong young muscles forced the light boat forward at a rapid rate.

"Help! oh, help!"

"It's some one in the water," muttered Sumner, endeavoring to locate the source of the sound, as the cry was repeated.

"Halloo!" he shouted. "Keep up, I'm coming."

"Help! oh, help!" The agonized cry came faintly again; more faintly than before, as though the person uttering it was yielding to exhaustion.

Sumner again responded with shouts of encouragement. Unable to discern anything on the water ahead, he guided the boat wholly by the sounds coming from the darkness, pausing frequently to listen. But the object of his search had now discovered that succor was at hand. The cry changed to a louder call.

"This way, quick. I can't hold on much longer."

After a few moments of persistent search, the tender scraped against an object in the water. A voice gasped faintly —

"Give us a hand."

Sumner pulled in his oars. Leaning over the side he discerned a white face in the water, and a hand extended toward him. A few moments later he had succeeded in getting inboard over the stern a very wet and worn-out young man, who lay back on the thwart totally exhausted. In the dim light he appeared to be a young fellow, not much older than Sumner. He wore a suit of white duck, and his headgear was missing. This much, and the fact that the stranger was shivering with cold, moved Sumner to quick action.

In a few moments the rowboat, with the overturned canoe to which the stranger had been clinging dragging behind, was moving towards the "Spitfire," Sumner shaping his course by the lantern hung at the yacht's masthead.

"Where are you taking me?" the rescued man presently asked, when he had recovered sufficient strength and interest in his surroundings to put the question.

"To our yacht. Keep quiet and I'll bring you out all right."

The youth seemed contented with this explanation, and made no further remarks until Sumner had him aboard the "Spitfire."

When Sum had his charge aboard the yacht, the wet clothes were at once stripped off. Then followed a brisk rubbing with dry towels, and the donning of some of Sumner's extra clothing. By

the time this was done, water was hot on the oil stove, and a huge bowlful of that compound known as ginger tea was prepared, and devoured to the last drop by the rescued youth.

"Jolly, but that feels immense!" exclaimed the convalescent, as strength and spirits began to return. "And you're a trump, Mr. — Mr. ——"

"Parker," supplemented Sumner, heartily shaking the hand that was extended.

"My name's Cheney Killen," said that youth, who was a very good-looking sort of a fellow, now that he was dried and warmed. "How did I get into that scrape?" he continued, noting the look of inquiry in Sum's eyes. "Oh, just through my beastly recklessness; but, by George! my folks will be frantic about me," he broke out suddenly. "What time is it, please?"

"After eleven."

"And I've been soaking around in the water ever since nine," groaned young Killen. "Oh, 'twas horrible. I might have gotten ashore if I could have only seen the shore; but I was lost — lost and losing strength every minute. That little cockle shell — ugh! no more canoes for me on salt water. Where am I, anyway?"

"You're on the yacht 'Spitfire,' anchored near Pod Island."

"Then I'm pretty near home, after all, for I board over at Hope Island.

"Say, Mr. Parker," he went on, "you've done

me one great good turn already, and I hate to presume on your kindness, but my parents will be horribly worried about me. Would you mind rowing me over? I haven't the gumption to do it yet myself."

A few minutes later the tender, with Sum at the oars and Cheney Killen in the stern, wrapped in a heavy overcoat, and his discarded wet clothing also aboard, was feeling her way across the channel toward Hope Island, while the canoe, emptied of its water, was towed behind.

Since the steamer landing on Hope Island was on the farther side of the island, it was fully an hour before Sumner had landed his charge, waited until the loaned clothing had been returned to him — for he could hardly go on the cruise without it — and was pulling back to the yacht. Skirting Hope Island, in due time he cleared the northern point, and struck out across the channel toward Pod Island. But to his dismay, he was unable to descry the light at the "Spitfire's" masthead, and then, without warning, a dense bank of fog swooped down and enveloped him.

Without a compass, with only his sense of direction for a guide, Sum rowed doggedly on. He had never been caught in a fog before, and as the channel was not over a third of a mile wide, and the Pod Island shore a long one, felt certain he would bring up on it somewhere. This accomplished, he could easily skirt it till the cove was reached.

But after fifteen minutes of steady rowing, he was apparently no nearer his destination than at first. Hoping to catch the sound of surf, he paused to listen intently. Save for the distant hooting of a steam fog horn, the dense vapor seemed to shut out all sounds.

"Well," he muttered wearily, again resuming the oars, "it can't be much farther." But at the end of another quarter hour he was apparently as far from land as ever. With a feeling of disgust and apprehension, it came over him that he was lost.

"And I may be within a few rods of Pod Island, and not know it," he muttered.

He uttered several loud halloos, to which, however, there was no response.

"Confound the luck!" he ejaculated in dismay. "I might go on rowing around here all night and not get ashore, and find myself when the fog lifted perhaps close to land, or maybe miles out to sea."

He knew, however, at this time, that the boat was still among the islands, for the deep-sea swell did not reach him.

Making a hurried calculation, he decided the tide was ebbing. This in itself was enough to occasion disquiet, since the currents might sweep him out between the islands without his fully realizing it.

"I'll let her drift awhile, and then see what's up," he finally decided. Pulling in the oars, he donned the overcoat which Killen had worn, and sat down in the stern. So dense was the fog that one could

almost cut it, and so intense the gloom that the boat's bow was indistinguishable. Occasionally a gust of damp wind struck Sumner, but it seemed to have no perceptible effect upon the fog.

After many minutes of this, during which Sum kept his ears strained for the slightest sound of swashing surf, he was rewarded. Just the faintest "wash-wash" came through the darkness, apparently off to starboard, as the boat then lay. Louder and louder it grew, till its character was unmistakable.

Heading the tender for the sound, Sum soon ran it ashore on a pebbly beach. Pulling the boat well up out of reach of the water, he started inland to ascertain his whereabouts. At the top of the beach he was confronted by a steep bush-covered bank, up which he forced his way with difficulty until he accidentally stumbled into a well-defined path. Arrived at the top, his eyes immediately caught sight of a bright glow in the fog ahead. As he approached the outlines of a window became visible; but Sumner had not watched it for more than an instant before he leaped to a conclusion. The light streaming forth from the window was not lamplight.

"That house is afire!" he exclaimed, hurrying forward.

Out from the window, like a lurid eye in the darkness, flashed a stream of ruddy light, increasing momentarily in intensity as the dancing flames within gained progress.

A moment later Sum reached the window and peered in. The interior of the building was a seething mass of flames, though as yet the only external sign was the light through the window, and the muffled crackling of the fire. The building was a small one, evidently a fisherman's shanty. The interior was a single unplastered room. A small stove stood in one corner, a table in another. There were shelves against the wall opposite the window; fishing poles leaned in a corner, and decoy ducks hung near them.

All these things Sumner's eyes grasped in an instant, as on a dark night a landscape is momentarily revealed by a lightning flash.

In the center of the floor was a long box, and upon it rested an object covered with a blanket. The floor was a seething sea of flame. It burned like a tank of oil, the fire rising and falling in waves about the object in the center, and sweeping up the walls. In a few moments more the flames would burst out, and there was no hope of saving any of the shanty's contents. But what was that object lying on the box in the center of the room? Some one asleep?

The thought aroused Sumner's every energy. In mad haste he hurried to the door, and threw his weight impetuously against it. It was fastened, and would not yield. Again and again he shook it, shouting loudly to the possible inmate as he did so; but the stout door did not give way.

A burst of light overhead announced that the fire

had broken through the roof. In less time than it takes to tell it, a stream of flame was shooting heavenward, and the heat in the vicinity of the shanty speedily became unbearable. But before this, Sumner abandoned his attempts to force the door, and returned to the window. Strangely enough, the heat within had not shattered the glass. Seizing a board from the ground, with one swoop he smashed every pane.

"Halloo!" he called loudly. "Wake up, for your life!"

The answer was a burst of flame that made him stagger back, but ere he went he saw a sight that thrilled him with horror.

The covering had burned away, and the form of a man lay revealed upon the box. In that last glance Sum saw this form writhe convulsively. The arms, which had been folded across the breast, were raised with a jerk and dropped till they hung down to the floor. The face turned toward the window, and the last glimpse that Sumner caught was of the features — pallid, with closed eyes, unconscious in that seething sea of flame and smoke.

And now the roof was a mass of fire. The heat forced Sumner back. In a daze he walked to a tree a short distance away, and leaning wearily against it, watched the destruction of the shanty. The roof fell in — the sides fell in — still he watched, fascinated by the horror of the scene. When at last the building was naught but a mass of glowing ruins, with an effort he pulled his scattered wits together

and tried to think what he should do. The piece of wood with which he had shattered the window was still in his hands. It was a portion of a box cover, and letters upon it caught his eye. Lifting it to catch the light from the burning embers, he easily spelled them out.

"Maj. E. J. Bangs, Pod Island."

Some time later, Sumner Parker, sick at heart with the horror of the scene he had witnessed, pulled the tender slowly into the cove and boarded the "Spitfire." The lettering on the box-board had told what island he had reached. Returning to the boat, he merely followed the shore to the yacht's anchorage.

The lantern was burning at the masthead, but there were no sounds of life on the yacht when Sumner came aboard. He made the tender fast, and, stepping into the cockpit, peered into the cabin.

The swinging lamp was burning as he had left it; but as he noted that Val and Cal were still absent, a feeling of apprehension swept over him.

"Where are the boys?" he muttered, in alarm.

"Never mind the boys," growled a voice behind him.

The next moment he was seized in a grasp of iron, and forced into the cabin. The doors closed behind him — the companion-hatch slid shut — the lock snapped. He was a prisoner.

CHAPTER IX

SUMNER BEGINS AN INVOLUNTARY CRUISE

For a moment Sumner was speechless with astonishment and sudden fear. He was too surprised, indeed, to struggle against his adversary; nor would it have made any difference had he done so, for the unknown person who had taken possession of the yacht had him at a complete disadvantage. Sumner could not have prevented his sudden entrance into the cabin to save his life.

But he recovered his tongue and his wits at the same moment. He threw his weight against the doors.

"Let me out!" he shouted. "Open up here, quick! What do you mean by this?"

The cabin doors were made of good stuff, and the fastenings were strong, as they were intended to be. There was no yielding to all the force Sumner could bring to bear against them. He presently desisted his efforts, but redoubled his shouts.

Suddenly bethinking himself of the skylight, he hurriedly began unloosening the fastenings, when a face appeared close to the glass above, and a voice said menacingly:—

"Stop your noise!"

"Let me out!" cried Sumner. "Who are you, and what does this mean?"

"I've borrowed the boat for a pleasure trip," replied the outsider, hoarsely. "Keep easy, sonny. Above all things keep your yawp shut. I've got a pistol here to shut it for you, if you don't close it yourself."

The voice ceased. Sumner sat down in bewilderment, and tried to think what he should do.

"Oh, Val and Cal," he muttered despairingly, "where are you, and why don't you come?"

Sounds outside now indicated that the mainsail was going up, and the yacht heeled over slightly as the breeze filled the canvas. It righted presently as the pressure on the sail brought the bow into the wind, for the sheet was loose, and no one was at the tiller.

Now the jib was hoisted; up came the anchor; and the stranger came hurrying aft. The wind, what there was of it, was still in the southeast. The yacht went off on the port tack.

"That means he's working out of the cove," muttered Sumner, noting the heel of the yacht. "Where in creation does the rascal intend to go?"

Sumner now roused himself to action. For a few minutes he tried to imagine what his friend Jasper Jenks would have done under such circumstances. Unluckily for Sumner, the author of Jasper's exciting adventures afloat and ashore had not placed his hero in any situation similar to the one in

which Sumner found himself. In a pinch like this, had he done so, a revenue cutter might have appeared, or a shooting star or a stroke of apoplexy have struck the villain where he stood. Providence might have placed a dynamite bomb in Jasper's hand, with which he could have wiped his enemy off the face of the earth; but Providence was not so kind to Sumner Parker.

There was one thing to do, and that was to stop the unknown man from running off with the "Spitfire"; but how?

Sumner first extinguished the cabin lamp. Although from his position at the tiller the steersman could not see through the skylight into the cabin, yet the tiller could be made fast, and the yacht would take care of herself long enough for him to make an inspection of his prisoner from time to time. Sumner did not want his movements inspected.

Having blown out the light, he began a hunt for Val's revolver, which it suddenly occurred to him was on board. He believed it was in one of the cabin lockers, and thought it would be easy to lay hands on it at once; but several minutes' fumbling in the dark left him no better off than at first. Sumner finally concluded that Val must have it on his person. He could not find even the cartridges.

Before his hurried search was completed the "Spitfire" had emerged from the cove, the helmsman had trimmed in his sheets, and headed the yacht more into the south, still on the port tack.

"Can he be running for Stroudport?" queried Sumner, anxiously. "He wouldn't be such a fool."

He gave up hunting for the revolver. It now occurred to him that there was a sliding door in the forward cabin bulkhead, which led into the forepeak. There was, also, a small hatch on the forward port deck which also opened into the forepeak.

Here was a way of exit. Now should he make his way out, leap overboard before the unknown should stop him, and swim for shore and personal safety, leaving the yacht in the hands of the robber, or "pirate," as Sum mentally denominated him? Or should he gain the deck, taking such weapon as he might find in the forepeak, and, awaiting a favorable opportunity, make an onslaught on the enemy?

For personal reasons the first course seemed preferable, although there was little to cheer in the thought of a swim in the chilly water at that time of night.

But feelings of responsibility for the yacht's safety finally overcame his desire for escape. He slid back the panel in the bulkhead, and crept into the forepeak. This was a small space in the extreme forward part of the yacht, and was so well filled with boxes of provision, spare canvas, rope, a spare anchor, and other articles, that Sumner had considerable difficulty in reaching the hatch at all.

He had to shift the forepeak's contents considerably to make a passage, but finally, on his hands and knees, reached a position immediately beneath

the hatch. From among the miscellany he secured a stout club, which appeared to be a spare tiller, and had also run across the brass saluting cannon, which had been put below during the day.

For the moment he was fired with the idea of cannonading his enemy, but gave up the project the next moment, since he had no missiles for the piece, even should he be able to find the powder.

While he had been considering this idea, the yacht came about on the starboard tack. She had reached the southern end of the island, and was standing out to sea. The thought filled Sumner with great alarm, although the new position of the "Spitfire" was more favorable for his exit from the hatchway. With the yacht on the starboard tack, her mainsail would help to conceal him from the helmsman.

Sumner pushed up the hatch and slid it off upon the deck, with as little noise as possible. Then he paused to listen. There was no sound save the splash of water and the seething at the yacht's cutwater. Apparently the "pirate" was at the tiller. Sumner next laid his club out, and then carefully squeezed through the aperture and got on deck.

Before he could make any further movement there came a quick step behind, and his arms were pinioned to his sides by a pair of hands that gripped like iron. All his struggles were futile. His captor held on tightly, turned his captive around, and forcibly shoved him toward the cockpit.

"Help!" shouted Sumner, with the full force of his lungs, suddenly realizing that a cry for aid might be productive of good results. "Help! Help!"

"Save your wind!" adjured Sumner's captor, gruffly, though he did not seem to mind the outcry. "I'm not going to kill you. I want to have a talk."

In short order Sumner was bundled into the cockpit, and sat down with a thump near the sternsheets. Not till then did he get a glimpse of his captor, and even then it was so dark that the closest scrutiny revealed little. In the dusk the "pirate" looked to be a thick-set man of above average height; his clothing was dark in color, and a slouch hat was pulled down over his eyes.

But there was a certain air about the man that seemed strangely familiar, though at the moment Sumner could not connect it with any person he had ever seen.

But the junior member of the "Spitfire's" starboard watch did not waste time inspecting his captor. Although deeply incensed at the cheeky way in which the yacht had been appropriated, he realized that it would be better to give attention to the situation in which the "Spitfire" was placed. It was not an enviable one.

When he had come aboard from the island, the fog had just begun to thin a trifle. Now it had cleared away almost completely; but the moon was

obscured by clouds that rendered it difficult to discern objects accurately at any distance.

Not far away to port was a lump of blackness that represented Pod Island. Sumner's captor seemed to know his location well enough to keep from going ashore in the dimness, but the warning note of danger came in the rapid freshening of the wind, and an occasional growl of thunder to westward, suggesting a squall that might swoop down in fury.

There was another sound, too, occurring at intervals of perhaps five minutes, that came from the misty darkness ahead. It sounded like the report of a gun. Sumner had been hearing it for some little time, and as he sat down under the impetus of a push from his captor, it sounded again.

As he caught the sound, the helmsman put the tiller over a trifle in an evident endeavor to head the craft in the exact direction whence the report had come. Then he turned to Sumner.

"Why don't you talk?" he inquired, with a short laugh. "You had plenty of chin when you first came aboard."

Sumner's first impulse had been to give the "pirate" a verbal "dressing down," but suddenly remembering that Jasper Jenks' favorite motto was "Say nothing, but saw wood," he had awaited developments in silence.

"I want you to talk," rejoined Sumner, with a faint tremble in his voice. "Who are you? What are you going to do with the yacht?"

"Why don't you ask what I am going to do with you?" rejoined his companion. "Do you see *that?*"

That was a revolver, and Sumner could not very well help seeing it, since it was stuck so closely to his face that he could have looked down the barrel had there been more light.

"That will talk for me," went on his captor, sharply, without waiting for a response. "It can talk to good purpose if necessary. All I want of you is to obey orders, and mind right up sharp. Do you hear? If you don't, well" — the man laughed unpleasantly — "there will be something more than talking done, and it might be uncomfortable for one of us; and that's not myself."

Sumner felt relieved when the pistol was pocketed again. Then he ventured to ask a question.

"Where are we going?"

"Do you hear that noise?" asked the "pirate."

That noise was a repetition of the sound that had been coming at intervals from the thickness ahead.

"Yes. What does it mean?"

"That there's a craft out there, and I'm going aboard of her," declared the helmsman.

Sumner experienced a decided feeling of relief at this declaration, since it promised quick riddance of his unwelcome guest. Yet with every evidence of a squall at hand, would the departure of the "pirate" better his condition?

"What'll become of me and the yacht?"

"Sail back."

"Sail back?" reiterated Sumner, dismayed. "Why, it's all I can do to sail her in fair weather. Do you hear that thunder?"

In his excitement Sumner grasped his companion's arm appealingly. The other nodded coolly.

"We're going to have a heavy squall," Sum continued anxiously, "and I can't sail the 'Spitfire' back to Pod Island in a squall any more than I can fly."

"That's not my lookout," was the other's heartless declaration. "I never asked you to come along."

"You are the biggest scamp unhung," burst forth Sumner, in great wrath. At this moment he longed for the strength of a giant. How he would mop up the deck with the "pirate."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" sneered his captor.

"Haven't decided," was the bitter retort, "whether to shoot or hang you; but just listen to me. If you don't get your dirty hide well warmed for this highway robbery — this — this piracy on the high seas" — which term, it occurred to him, was more applicable to the offense — " then call my name Dennis."

"Shut up," growled the stranger, sharply. "I can't sail this boat and listen to you."

Sumner obeyed, and sullenly awaited the outcome of events.

During the foregoing conversation the yacht had

been making good headway. The increasing distinctness with which each successive report was heard from ahead showed that their destination was close at hand. Yet fast as the yacht was traveling, the squall was coming faster. Nearer and nearer sounded the thunder, while the darkness was almost incessantly illumined by lightning flashes of increasing brilliancy. To crown all, the wind, that had been coming quite evenly from the southeast, hauled abruptly into the west, and began to blow in great gusts that careened the "Spitfire" till the seas came tumbling over the bow.

An unusually heavy gust nearly laid the craft on her beam ends, and the helmsman, really frightened, put the tiller over and the yacht came swooping up into the wind.

"Let go peak and throat halyards till I say stop," commanded the "pirate," hauling in on the mainsheet till the boom was amidships. Sumner obeyed, and a double reef was quickly taken in the mainsail.

"Let's keep her as she is till the storm strikes," nervously suggested Sumner.

"Not much. The steamer is not far away, and we can reach her before the squall breaks.

"I say," he went on. "You got any rubber coats aboard? 'Cause if you have, trot 'em out. I'm not going to get soaked to the skin if I can help myself."

He produced the cabin key, and Sum secured two mackintoshes, which they donned.

With her sail area reduced the yacht behaved

much better. No more water came over the bow, but Sum suddenly bethought himself of the open hatch. Hastening forward to close it, he stumbled over the pigeon coop, cut its lashings, and placed it in the forepeak before the hatch was put on.

Grasping a stay, he steadied himself against the plunging of the yacht and peered ahead. The gusts of wind were driving the thinned mist before them, and through the gloom he caught the gleam of two lights, one red, one green. Then a brilliant lightning flash lit up the sea, and for an instant the white hull and upper works of a steamer not far distant stood out in startling distinctness — then vanished in absolute darkness.

A moment later came the familiar flash and report from her direction. Sumner hurried back to the cockpit.

"What steamer is that?" he asked.

"None of your business."

"She's not an eighth of a mile off," persisted Sumner. "Just fire off your revolver and let her come up to us."

"You want me to use up my cartridges, don't you?"

"Bother the cartridges. Don't you hear *that?*"

The wind had suddenly fallen until the yacht had scarce steerageway; but out of the gloom and mist astern sounded the whistling and shrieking of the coming squall. Before the helmsman could do more than cast an apprehensive glance behind, it was upon them.

A dazzling lightning flash, coupled with a crash of thunder that sounded as though the world were cleft asunder, dazed the senses of the two in the "Spitfire's" cockpit. Then came the wind, and borne by it a torrent of rain.

It struck the sails with a fierce slap that threatened to rip out the mast. Luckily the main-sheet was loose, for in the twinkling of an eye it was snatched from the helmsman's hand. The boom flew outboard with a swish, and the yacht was relieved of the sudden pressure that had all but capsized her.

Sumner managed to creep to the mainsail halyards, and let them go; the pirate clung fast to the tiller; and the "Spitfire," with her nose deep in the surges from the pressure on the jib, started off like a racehorse. She had taken the bits in her teeth.

As Sumner pulled desperately at the mainsail downhaul, the lightning revealed a picture that gave him a slight clue to the reason for his present situation.

White against the blackness, and rapidly falling astern of the plunging yacht, lay the steamer — unmistakably the "Sea Rover," while the man at the "Spitfire's" tiller, his pale, dismayed face turned toward the other vessel, was none other than Jones, skipper of the steam-yacht.

A moment later the "Sea Rover" was lost in the mists, and nothing was left but a faint hail from her deck, sounding like the distant cry of a demon of the storm.

CHAPTER X

SUMNER SENDS A MESSAGE HOME

WIND-SWEPT and drenched with driving rain, for some time after the striking of the squall the occupants of the "Spitfire's" cockpit did little but hang on for dear life, letting the yacht have her way.

Like a blotch of smoke the steamer went astern. Jones clung desperately to the tiller, and kept the yacht before the wind, but he was no expert in handling a boat like the "Spitfire" in heavy weather. In a fair wind he could manage a sailboat, but now he had temporarily lost his presence of mind.

Gone, too, was his opportunity for getting the yacht's head to the wind, for both sea and wind were rising so rapidly that he did not dare make the attempt.

Sumner, by dint of much hard pulling, managed to haul down the mainsail, and passed a few gaskets around it. But presently all the joy passed out of his life, for a nausea so intense, so unspeakable, assailed him, that the capture of the yacht by Jones, and her perilous position, all became secondary matters. He was seasick, and so seasick. Scarcely able to raise his hand, for hours he lay on a cabin bunk, and, as he said afterwards, "wished more 'n a million

times the 'Spitfire' would go to the bottom so he could die in peace."

So passed the night. Morning dawned, wet, gray, and cheerless. It found the "Spitfire" scudding dead before the wind, which had settled down into a roaring gale. Jones could not leave the tiller for an instant. Huge rollers chased close upon the yacht, momentarily threatening to swamp her. At least, so it seemed to Jones, who could not look astern without a feeling of terror.

By noon the wind eased a little, and he left the tiller long enough to rout Sumner out of the cabin, and put him, sick as he was, in charge of it.

"Hang on to that tiller," he ordered roughly, and while Sumner mechanically did so, Jones heated some coffee and opened a can of meat. He presently brought Sumner a can filled with coffee. The warm drink was like a tonic, and the youth felt better immediately.

As the wind continued to fall, Jones began to entertain hopes of getting the yacht's head to the wind; and at the end of half an hour, by dint of judicious maneuvering, this was accomplished, and the "Spitfire" was plunging and dipping with her sails furled, an extemporized sea anchor keeping her bow to the wind.

As the effect of the coffee wore away, Sumner's sickness returned, and he went back to the bunk. Jones, also, now the yacht was in an easier position, and watching could serve no purpose, turned in on

the opposite bunk, and slept for hours in utter exhaustion. So passed the long afternoon, and then night came down, black and dismal.

Sometime during the night Sumner was aroused from the stupor into which he had fallen by a loud call from his companion, who had waked and gone on deck. Half dazed as he was, its forceful meaning startled him.

"Get out of there! We're going on the rocks!"

Sumner dragged himself into the cockpit. As he emerged, a blast of the rain-laden gale smote him forcibly, but he paid little heed. In the dim light he saw Jones on the forward deck, working furiously. The roding used with the anchor had been detached, and now connected the yacht with the floating sea-anchor, or drag, which for hours had kept the "Spitfire's" bow to the wind. In the hope of getting out an anchor to keep them from going ashore, Jones was struggling to get spare roding from the forepeak to replace that already in use.

Astern, in the direction the yacht was rapidly drifting, despite the drag, through the dusk gleamed a line of white, seemingly almost under the "Spitfire's" stern.

But rapidly as Jones worked, the yacht drifted still more rapidly. He presently saw the uselessness of his efforts, and hurried aft.

"It's no use!" he bawled in Sumner's ear. "Look out for yourself when we strike!"

Bright and clear dawned the morning. The last of the storm clouds were scudding away eastward, and little remained to tell of the storm save the heavy sea that broke forcefully on the rocky shore of a small island.

Fast aground at the head of a cove, several hundred feet back from the line of breakers beating on the reef, lay the "Spitfire." Save for a generally storm-swept appearance, and the loss of her tender, she seemed little the worse for the ordeal through which she had passed.

At the last moment, when both Sumner and Jones momentarily expected to feel the crunch of rocks beneath her hull, a break appeared in the line of boiling surf, and borne on the turbulent breakers the yacht was swept through an opening in the reef into comparatively calm water beyond, where she ran aground with a shock that threw her occupants to the deck.

Here, though the force of the wind was unbroken, that of the waves was decidedly lessened. By midnight, satisfied of their safety, the "Spitfire's" crew were sleeping soundly, for the storm was virtually over.

With the feeling of steady ground under him, Sumner soon recovered from his seasickness. Almost before day dawned he crept on deck, taking good care not to awaken Jones. It was good to see land again, even though it was nothing but a worthless mass of rocks, sand, and bushes. No signs of human

life were visible. From the head of the long and narrow cove in which the "Spitfire" lay stranded, the ground rose steeply in a ridge too high for Sumner to see over. Over the bow, some hundred yards distant, was the narrow entrance in the line of surf-beaten rocks, through which the yacht had so providentially drifted. The cove was pear-shaped, the mouth — which represented the stem — being narrow, and the head tapering nearly to a point.

Well up toward the head of the cove, close under a high bank, the "Spitfire" had grounded — so near shore, in fact, that Sumner easily jumped the distance. Over rocks and through bushes he worked his way to the top of the ridge, and there took a comprehensive survey of the island.

It was small, and uninhabited; rather circular in shape, and not much over half a mile in diameter. The ridge ran through it from north to south — as he determined by the sun, now rising — and looking down at the yacht, Sumner noted that the cove pretty evenly divided that portion of the island that lay to the east of the ridge.

Other islands came into view as the sun ate up the mists. To the northward, separated by a narrow strip of water, loomed a small one with an enormous mass of stone rising from its center — a mass that was a very good reproduction of the body of a huge horse. That island seemed as deserted as the one on which he stood; but several miles to the westward was another shore, and although no houses

were visible, smoke was distinctly to be seen rising from trees that lined the water.

His survey ended, Sumner wasted no time in commiserating himself on the unpleasant outlook. He had a scheme for ultimate relief in mind, and now hastened to put it into operation.

He quietly boarded the yacht. Jones was still soundly asleep. Without disturbing him, Sumner obtained his kodak and developing outfit, and some writing materials, from the cabin. From the forepeak he secured the pigeon coop and a piece of tarpaulin. The latter he spread over the skylight to darken the cabin, and thus induce his captor to sleep undisturbed by the sunlight.

Jones continued to snore with unabated vigor, so Sumner carried his belongings ashore, to a spot where there were numerous pools of rain-water in hollows of the ledges.

The pigeons were all right, though somewhat ruffled, and drooping in spirits. When food and water were given them they ate industriously, however; so Sumner left them thus engaged, and taking his camera, made several exposures. These included a picture of the "Spitfire," and characteristic views of the island. Next he photographed the near-by island, with its huge stone horse, and also attempted a view of what he thought to be the mainland, where the smoke was visible. When several pictures had been taken, he returned to the pigeons and his developing outfit.

Every one who has used a pocket kodak knows that the negatives are made on a strip of thin celluloid film, which is coated with an emulsion that is extremely sensitive to light. On each strip several exposures may be made before it is necessary to reload the camera, and by an ingenious arrangement of light-proof paper, the reel, with the film wound upon it, can be taken from the camera in daylight, and replaced by a fresh roll.

Sumner opened the camera and removed the film roll. Next he opened up his outfit, which included a daylight developing machine, a measuring glass, a tray or two, developing and fixing powders, and, in fact, everything necessary to develop the film on the spot.

He filled the measuring glass with clear rain-water from a pool, and dissolved a developer powder in it. Then, placing the film roll in the machine, he poured in the developer and replaced the cover. After turning the crank for several minutes, the development was finished, the developer was poured out, and replaced by rinsing water. This was followed in turn by the clearing and fixing solution. A few minutes later the strip of negatives, clear and distinct, was soaking in a pool.

Time was now very valuable, for despite precautions, Jones might wake up and come hunting for his prisoner. Sumner was obliged, therefore, to slight somewhat the final washing of the negatives, but he soaked them fifteen minutes, first in one pool

and then another. Meantime he wrote a short letter on some very thin and tough paper, which he had brought for this especial purpose.

"DEAR CAPTAIN BUCKLIN:" it ran. "I address this to you, as you will see it first. Please tell my father that the 'Spitfire' was stolen from her anchorage at Pod Island with me on her about two o'clock Wednesday morning. We were blown out to sea, and ran ashore last night on this island, where I now am. It is now Thursday morning, six o'clock.

"Tell Val and Cal the yacht is all right, but stuck in a cove. As I don't know where I am, I have taken some kodak pictures, and send the negatives by the other pigeon. As you know all about this coast, I hope you will find out enough from them to tell you where I am. Nobody lives here, and I can't get away unless some one comes or sends for me. There is enough to eat, but I want to get away from Jones, the man who stole the yacht and still keeps me a prisoner. He is asleep on the 'Spitfire,' so I have been able to do this.

"I hope Farleigh Hartwell's broken arm is doing well. Oh, say, I think that Major Bangs was burned up in his cabin at Pod Island, Tuesday night. I found the place all afire, and saw some one inside asleep, but the door was fastened so I couldn't get in or do anything to help before the fire burned the cabin down.

"Don't worry, for I am all right, though I was more than seasick in the storm.

"Yours truly,

"SUMNER PARKER."

Having hastily composed this epistle, Sumner took the strip of negatives from the water, and cut apart the several exposures. These were now placed in a tray and covered with alcohol. After soaking them several minutes until the spirit had thoroughly

combined with the water in the film, he poured off the surplus alcohol. When exposed to the air the alcohol in the film rapidly evaporated, soon leaving the negatives dry and ready for use.

During the final drying, Sumner had made his letter into a tiny roll, wrapped it in oiled silk, and attached it to one of the pigeons. He now rolled up the films as compactly as possible and fastened them securely to the other bird. The pigeons were then released.

Freed, the carriers for the moment seemed loath to depart. But rising presently, after a few uncertain circles about Sumner's head, they struck out in a southwesterly direction, while the youth, with a big lump in his throat, watched them fly away.

When the birds had become mere pin points in the sky, Sumner hid his belongings in the bushes and walked down to the beach on the western side of the island. A short distance from shore a small islet rose from the water; it was little more than a protruding ledge, with a scant covering of sand and a few stunted bushes.

But what interested Sumner most was the "Spitfire's" missing tender, low in the water, lazily drifting between him and the islet.

After a few moments' watching had convinced him that the boat would not come ashore on the island, he pulled off his outer clothing, cap, sweater, trousers, shoes and stockings, and prepared to swim for it. He was clad thus in his light suit of summer

underclothing when a call came over the ridge behind him.

"Where are you, Parker?"

Hastily rolling his discarded clothes into a bundle, Sumner tucked them out of sight in a thicket, and the next minute was swimming impetuously for the boat. He had covered two thirds of the distance when Jones reached the beach.

Catching sight of Sumner's bobbing head, the fellow drew his revolver.

"Come back!" he shouted.

CHAPTER XI

SUMNER MAKES HIS DÉBUT IN CODVILLE

Now be it known that it was the least of all Sumner's intentions to return to Jones' clutches. He swam energetically toward the boat, nor did he pause until Jones repeated his command.

"Oh, halloo," he retorted, facing about and treading water. "It's you, is it?"

"What are you trying to do?" returned Jones, gruffly, holding the revolver in a conspicuous position. "Running away?"

"I'm trying to get the boat," returned Sumner, earnestly. "We need it the worst way, you know."

This ingenuous reply somewhat disarmed Jones' suspicions. He returned the revolver to his pocket.

"Go ahead, then. Bring it in. I thought you were trying to get away."

Elated at the success of this strategy, Sumner resumed his progress toward the tender, while Jones, believing he could still control the youth's movements with his revolver, should Sumner endeavor to outwit him, watched proceedings from the beach.

On reaching the boat, Sumner found, as he expected from the way it sat in the water, that rain and spray had filled it nearly two thirds full. In-

deed, were it not for the fact that it was provided with air reservoirs at bow and stern, the tender would undoubtedly have been swamped during the storm.

To his joy, both oars were securely wedged under the thwarts, as he had left them.

The current had by this time carried the tender close alongside the islet. A new idea popped into Sumner's head, and instead of getting aboard, he made his way to the bow, and proceeded to tug the craft toward the little island.

"Here, where are you going with that boat?" Jones demanded, as he perceived Sumner's movements.

"She's so full of water that I'm going to haul her out on this island and empty her before rowing back," explained Sumner, setting foot on the islet as he spoke. "And it will be a precious long time before I row back, too," he muttered under his breath.

Though Jones viewed this maneuver with suspicion, yet, noticing that Sumner apparently had no clothing on, he thought it impossible he would try to escape. Then, too, the distance to the islet was so short, and he considered himself so good a shot, that he felt sure he could terrorize the boy into returning, if he attempted to slip away. But he watched Sumner as a cat watches a mouse.

Sumner had craftily allowed the current to drift him past the side of the islet nearest the beach, and tugged the boat ashore at one side. It took him some

time to free her of water, for there was such a quantity inside that he could not immediately pull the boat up and turn her over. But vigorous work with the bailing dipper soon lightened the boat, so he hauled her out, tipped her up, and the last of the briny contents ran out.

Not caring to run the risk of being hit by Jones' bullets, instead of shipping the oars, Sumner turned the boat around, heading the bow offshore. Then he waded into the water, hauled the tender off, and, swimming on his back — that is, holding the painter in his hands, and striking out with his feet — with the entire boat between himself and the rascal on the beach, bent every energy to pulling the craft out of range.

When Jones caught the full significance of this performance his wrath was something worth seeing. He discharged every barrel of his revolver after the departing Sumner—without, however, inflicting any injury, and swore in mighty rage.

With fast-beating heart, but full of elation at his success, Sum steadily drew the tender farther and farther from shore, and when at last he felt himself to be out of range, clambered inboard and shipped the oars.

Jones was hurrying back over the ridge, but what cared he for Jones now? If that was mainland to the westward, he, Sumner, would have a sheriff after the scamp in less time than it takes to say "Jack Robinson," and get back the "Spitfire" into

the bargain. For how was Jones to get away from the island? The yacht was fast aground, and he had no rowboat.

Sumner bent to the oars with energy born of good luck. An hour later found him close to his destination. A broad, sandy beach, backed by pine woods, greeted his gaze as he drew nearer. Back from the shore a thin wreath of smoke mounted above the tree-tops, and he thought once he caught a glimpse of the roof of a house — these were the only signs of life.

Upon the beach a heavy surf was pounding — a condition of affairs the tender was illy adapted to combat. Consequently, a few minutes later, Sumner was flung, again wet to the skin, on the sandy shore, while the tender, which had capsized in spite of him, was washed up on the strand after him.

He made haste to secure the oars, and then, after pulling the tender up to a safe distance from the waves, made his way, pretty well tired out, and extremely hungry, to the top of the beach.

So far as temperature was concerned, the state of his attire caused him no inconvenience, for old Sol was now beating down in right good earnest. But Sum was in need of assistance, and being by nature extremely scrupulous as to his appearance, how he should manage to present himself to residents of this unknown locality was a problem requiring some thought.

Pondering this delicate question, he cautiously

left the beach, and almost immediately came to a fence. This surrounded a pasture in which several cows were grazing. Against the fence Sum leaned wearily, and gave himself up to the problem that confronted him.

"And do you, too, my young friend, find joy in contemplating the gentle ruminant?"

As this question was propounded directly behind him, Sumner jumped as though electrified. He turned in consternation, wishing the ground might open and swallow him; but the appearance of his interrogator reassured him.

It was a funny little man who stood before Sumner — a man, short of stature, with an enormous head, upon which lay a mop of fiery red hair, matched by mustache and whiskers of the same hue; his very prominent nose was surmounted by a pair of blue spectacles, and on the top of his head, with the red hair showing beneath like a fringe, was a broad-brimmed sombrero. An outing shirt of the vividest blue, baggy duck trousers, canvas shoes, and a blazer with vertical red and white stripes, completed a costume that was striking in the extreme.

No wonder that Sumner regained his composure, for the looks of the stranger for the moment took his thoughts off his own appearance.

"I'd find a heap more joy in a dry suit of clothes and a square meal," said Sumner, decidedly. "I say, Mister, can't you get me some togs?"

"Why, you are wet — drenched to the skin," exclaimed the man with the blue glasses, suddenly perceiving Sum's condition, and eyeing him critically. "And — ah — ah — your — ah — toilet is not as sumptuous as you — ah — probably wish it might be. Not so?"

"Sumptuous?" retorted Sumner. "Well, I should say not. I say, Mister, can't you help a fellow to some decent clothes? I would appreciate it — I really would, you know. I can't go up in the settlement in this rig. And though I haven't a cent in my clothes — " he grimaced drolly — "there's a good boat down there on the beach "— he indicated the "Spitfire's" tender — "that you can have for security till I can get to Stroudport and send 'em back to you."

The bewhiskered stranger listened attentively, and an expression of deep concern rested on his face as Sumner concluded his remarks.

"Clothes?" he exclaimed. "Certainly — certainly. Come to the house with me at once." And he started energetically away, expecting Sumner to follow; but that person drew back.

"I'd rather not," he said modestly, "if you don't mind bringing 'em here. I — you see — oh, hang it! wouldn't I make a spectacle of myself in this get-up?"

The red-headed man paused in his walk, and looked around. Like one aroused from preoccupation, he exclaimed in surprise:—

"Why don't you come, my young friend?"

"I — I'd rather not, in this costume," reiterated Sumner, mentally pondering what manner of man this was. "Hadn't you just as lief bring 'em here?"

"Of course," was the reply. "How stupid of me. You do not wish to appear before the populace in your present garb — or, rather, lack of garb. I have it," he went on, lifting a hand impressively; "you stay right here, and I will bring the clothes to you."

Off again he started, turned the corner of the pasture fence near at hand, and disappeared among the trees.

"What a funny old cove," mused Sumner, as he seated himself on a rock in the sun. "If every one here is like him, and adds as big a bunch of color to the landscape as he does, it's an outlandish place, that's all.

"There, I forgot to ask him what place this is," he went on. "But anyhow, when those clothes get here, I'll have some grub first whack. Then I'll alarm the authorities and have Jones arrested; and see about getting the yacht hauled off and taking her to Stroudport.

"Jehokey, but Val and Cal must be tearing their hair over the 'Spitfire.' Never mind, the pigeons will be home pretty soon. I only hope that the Cap'n will be around the cote when they get there."

Thus he mused aimlessly for some minutes, until

he was startled by a ringing, girlish laugh, mingled with the bark of a dog, off in the grove whither the red-haired stranger had gone.

"Ha-ha! I beat you, Jim," exclaimed the voice, in clear, ringing tones. "Don't tell me I can't outrun *you*."

"Oh, well," came the reply in a masculine grumble. "How can you help it when you push a fellow up against a tree. 'Twasn't fair."

The girlish laugh rang out again.

"Ho ! A poor excuse is better than none. But come, I'm going down on the beach."

Sumner Parker, seated on the rock in the warm sunlight, heard this conversation in an agony of apprehension lest his unlucky plight be discovered by the newcomers. When the girlish voice announced its owner's determination to go upon the beach, Sumner glanced eagerly about for a suitable hiding-place.

The only shelter near enough to be reached in time for concealment was the tender. For this haven of refuge Sumner made a dash, and crouched behind it just in time to avoid being seen by the youthful couple whose voices he had heard, as they presently emerged upon the beach, followed by a frisky little bull terrier.

"How blue the water is after the storm," exclaimed the young lady, enthusiastically, gazing off across the heaving sea.

"Yes," responded her companion, absently. His

eyes were following the dog as it went sniffing down the beach, occasionally uttering a short bark.

Presently the dog reached the "Spitfire's" tender, and began barking loudly at it, frisking about in a paroxysm of canine excitement, to the unutterable disgust of Sumner, who presently began throwing pebbles at his discoverer, in an attempt to drive him away.

But this simply excited the dog still more, until the air fairly rang with his sharp barks.

"What *is* the matter?" exclaimed the girl, in wonder. "What has that incorrigible puppy found behind that boat?"

"Give it up," replied the youth. "Let's go and see."

The pair were approaching this new point of interest, curiosity plainly written on their faces, when a voice from the direction of the boat reached them.

"Aw—I say," it ejaculated energetically. "Please don't come here! Please go away!"

These unexpected remarks from an invisible source served to whet their curiosity only the more, and they involuntarily quickened their pace toward the mysterious boat.

A remonstrance followed this advance, uttered in a tone that rose almost to a shriek.

"Aw, *don't — don't* come here! Don't, I beg of you — you see, I'm not presentable! *Oh!*"

The next moment a figure, clad in a costume as scanty as circus tights, arose hastily from the farther

side of the rowboat, and went running wildly along the beach, with the terrier barking vociferously at its heels.

"Who in the world is it?" queried the young man, in astonishment. Then a great light seemed to dawn upon him, and he threw his cap suddenly in the air. "Lordy, it must be Kent Ransome! Here, Tacks," he called loudly to the dog. "Tacks, come back here, you rascal."

But Tacks' attention was completely absorbed by the fleeing Sumner, who, after running along the beach for some distance, darted up the slope and vanished in a pine thicket.

"I think," exclaimed the girl, after a brief stare at the unlooked-for apparition, "that it is some one sadly in need of clothes."

CHAPTER XII

VAL AND CAL TAKE POSSESSION OF THE "SEA ROVER'S" WHEEL-HOUSE

WHEN the oarsmen brought the boat alongside the "Sea Rover," Val and Cal boarded the yacht with many misgivings. A stranger met them at the rail, and assisted them inboard.

"Where's Hartwell?" eagerly asked Val.

The man led the way to the cabin, and the trio entered. Their guide opened a door in the forward bulkhead, and motioned them into a small state-room, dimly lit by a swinging lamp.

"Here," he said, in low tones.

The boys entered the apartment, and for the moment did not notice that their companion failed to accompany them, nor that the door closed softly behind them, so intense was their anxiety concerning Hartwell.

Two berths, one above the other, were built into the wall. Cal hastily drew back the curtains that partially concealed them.

"You poor fellow——" he began in a compassionate tone.

"Where the dickens is he?" he asked in perplexity, for the berths were empty.

"They've taken us to the wrong place," exclaimed Val. "Look here." He turned to speak to the man who had conducted them to the stateroom, and great was his surprise to find nothing but the closed door. He uttered a whistle of astonishment.

"We're locked in, Cal," he said, after a vigorous manipulation of the door-knob failed to give them an exit.

"Oh, you must be mistaken," returned Cal. "Try again. The door is stuck."

Val tried again, but with a like result. There was no doubt they were prisoners. To add to their perplexity, the throbbing of the engine announced that the yacht was under way.

"What does it mean?" exclaimed Cal, in dismay.

"We'll find out mighty sudden," ejaculated his companion, with energy. He braced his shoulder against the door, and pushed with all his might. The wood cracked and buckled, but would not yield.

"Here, Cal," he muttered, "get your back against it, and see if we can't start the thing."

Cal complied, but their united efforts failed to force an exit, and they presently desisted, filled with indignant curiosity at the treatment they were receiving.

"Halloo!" shouted Val, loudly. "Halloo, there! Let us out. We're locked in."

Although footsteps sounded on the deck outside, no voice replied to the call.

"There may be a spring lock on the door that

caught when we came in, and they don't know that we are locked in," suggested Cal, hopefully.

"No doubt there is a spring lock, and it caught when we came in, but I'll bet a copper nickel we were shut in on purpose," retorted Val, leaning back against the bunks in deep perplexity.

Above the door was an air space of a few inches width. There was no side window in the stateroom, but the skylight that afforded light for the cabin extended above the stateroom also. Standing on the edge of the lower bunk, Cal tried to look over the door into the cabin; but the air space was too close to the ceiling to allow him a view of anything save the skylight and the upper portion of the apartment.

For several minutes, with heads close to the aperture, both called lustily for some one to release them. Not a soul responded.

"It's no use, old man," declared Val, presently. "We're trapped, sure's a gun. I don't believe Farleigh is on this boat, or ever has been. It's a rank game of some kind, though I can't imagine what."

"But why?" queried Cal, anxiously, forced to admit that his chum's surmise appeared correct.

"Don't ask me," was the reply, in a low tone. "It simply gets me. But I know one thing; we are going to get out of this hole."

"Yes, and get knocked on the head, perhaps," remonstrated Cal, who had a big bump of caution.

"Pshaw!" was the rejoinder from Val, as he fum-

bled in his hip pocket. But he suddenly bethought himself, and instead of bringing into sight anything from the aforesaid pocket, stepped to the light and extinguished it.

"I've got my revolver, Cal," he whispered. "We can't force the door, but perhaps we can the skylight. Once we get on deck we'll show these fellows a thing or two."

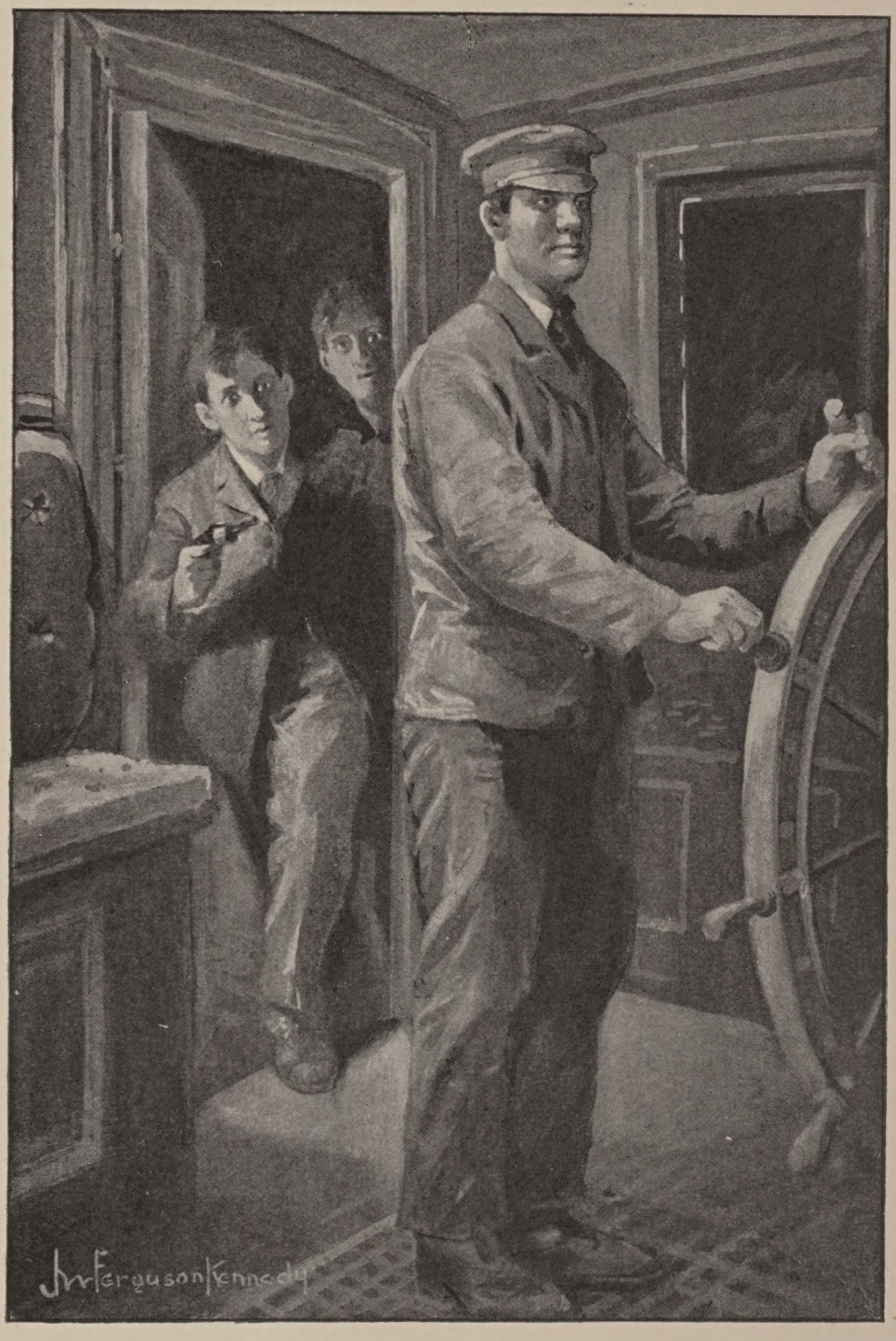
Hurriedly he outlined a plan that had popped into his head, in which Cal acquiesced.

By climbing upon the upper bunk they reached the skylight, which was in sections — each section being hinged, and opening independent of the others.

"Hurrah!" whispered Val, as he discovered the foregoing facts. "Here's our way out."

Stealthily they unhooked the catch, and pressed upward on the skylight frame. It yielded readily. When it was open perhaps two feet at the free side, Cal held it for Val to crawl out. This having been accomplished without discovery, Cal followed suit. So presently they found themselves on what might be termed the upper deck, just abaft the smoke-stack, which interposed itself between them and the wheel-house. This was also on the upper deck, and accessible by a door in the rear.

The darkness was now quite intense, owing to the clouds which obscured the moon, yet, as steps sounded just below, both boys crouched suddenly, for fear of discovery. Their fears, however, proved groundless. Without a suspicion of their presence,



"'FOLLOW ME, NOW,' MUTTERED VAL, 'WE'LL SEE FIRST WHO'S AT THE WHEEL!'"

the person passed along, and entered the engine room.

"Follow me, now," muttered Val, producing his revolver. "We'll see first who's at the wheel."

A very few moments later the helmsman — who was the identical fellow that had been in charge of the boat which brought them aboard — heard the door behind him softly open. He turned to look helplessly into the muzzle of Val's revolver while in the semi-gloom of the wheel-house two determined faces confronted him.

"What the ——" he stammered, starting back in astonishment.

"Put about and head for our yacht," commanded Val, firmly. "And keep your mouth shut," he added, as an intimation that the helmsman was not to alarm the rest of the yacht's crew.

Like a flash the pilot attempted to press a button in the wall, but his design was quickly thwarted by Val, who gripped the fellow's collar and pulled him forcibly back.

"Sit down," muttered Brandon, through set teeth, and the fellow perforce obeyed, dropping limply on one of the side seats.

The wheel now swung free, but Val grasped it with one hand, while with the other he kept his revolver handy.

"Tie him, Cal," he ordered, for it was tacitly understood that Val was to direct operations.

In a corner lay a coil of small rope. The fellow

offered little resistance as Cal bound him tightly hand and foot, but eyed the revolver apprehensively.

This done, Val endeavored to ascertain the whereabouts of the yacht, which was moving at about half speed through the dimness. Off to starboard there seemed to be a mass of black lying low on the water, and far away, dead ahead, a light twinkled through the night.

The skipper of the "Spitfire" knew the yacht was somewhere among the islands of the lower bay, but for the life of him he could not tell where. In the first place, he was uncertain in which direction the yacht had gone off at the start, nor could he calculate what distance she had traversed. Again, he had never been sailing in the lower bay at night, and there was nothing familiar about the surroundings.

"Where are we?" he finally demanded of the captive, who sat in gloomy silence under Cal's espionage.

"Find out, if you can," was the brusque retort. The late helmsman was regaining a trifle of the assurance he had lost when the boys made their unexpected appearance.

"So?" retorted Val, sarcastically. "Then if I have the fortune to pile the 'Sea Rover' up on one of these islands, don't blame me."

He put the wheel down, and gradually brought the yacht around till she headed in a direction exactly opposite to that in which she had been moving. He had found her headed northeast by east; she

now headed southwest by west, and the change had been made without arousing the notice of the crew.

The rest of the yacht's men were evidently congregated in the engine room, for when Val pressed his ear to the speaking tube, he caught snatches of conversation, and an occasional burst of laughter. But who could say when some one might take it into his head to pay the wheel-house a visit? The thought shook Val's nerves.

"Go aft, Cal," he whispered, motioning his chum to his side, "and see if the rowboat is towing astern."

Cal left the wheel-house, and Val began to realize that in his angry desire to retaliate on the men who had taken him prisoner, he had acted unnecessarily and perhaps fatally in overpowering the pilot and getting control of the wheel. If the small boat was in the water — which was undoubtedly the case — it would have been a simple thing to have slipped down the after-ladder to the lower deck, and so into her. By assailing the pilot, and heading the yacht about, nothing had been gained, save possibly a mile or two of rowing in case they were fortunate enough to escape in the rowboat, while the chances of their discovery were increased tenfold.

Their absence from the stateroom could not long go unobserved; while, as before stated, some one might visit the pilot-house at any moment. As these

thoughts now flashed through Val's mind, he waited in a very agony of impatience for Cal's return.

The whistle sounded at the speaking tube. A voice called loudly:—

"Gone to sleep up there? Ain't it most time to pull up?"

"Get up here," Val fiercely adjured the captive pilot, pulling him to his feet so his head came against the mouthpiece. "Tell 'em we'll pull up very shortly," he commanded, "and don't put any frills in if you value a whole skin."

With a tremor in his tones the fellow did as he was bid. As he sank back upon the seat, Cal arrived to announce that the tender was dragging astern, and the coast was clear.

Hastily lashing the wheel, Val stuffed his handkerchief with more force than politeness into the captive's mouth, and took a couple of turns of line about his head to hold it there.

Rapidly then, and without noise, the boys made their way aft and descended to the lower deck. No one was in sight, and the tender was dimly discernible at the end of a few fathoms of line.

"In with you," whispered Cal, when he had drawn the boat in. A minute later both were in the tender. Cal's knife severed the painter, and they were left bobbing in the wake of the steam-yacht, which was presently swallowed up in the gloom.

"Hooray!" cried Val, feeling a ton's weight roll from his mind. "Now for Pod Island and the

'Spitfire.' Let's get out the oars, old man, and hustle, for those fellows may be back after us presently.

"I think we managed that escape rather well," he continued in a happy tone, while Cal fumbled in the bottom of the boat for the oars, "though, after all, there was no earthly use in overpowering the pilot, except to get ourselves nearer home and save rowing.

"What's the matter?" he went on, as Cal still fumbled about the boat's bottom.

"Matter enough," was the grim retort. "There isn't a single oar here. We're saved lots of rowing, because the oars are on board the 'Sea Rover.'"

CHAPTER XIII

MAJOR BANGS APPEARS IN A VILLAINOUS CHARACTER

"No oars!" exclaimed Val, in sudden dismay, when Carroll Morse announced the result of his search.

"Not an oar."

"What a pair of dunderheads we are," muttered Val, gloomily, as he fumbled about in a vain attempt to disprove Cal's statement.

"Agreed," Carroll responded laconically. "Miles from the yacht — dark night — open boat — no oars." He laughed and sat down, but there was no mirth in his laugh.

"We may drift upon some island," said Val, hopefully.

"More likely out to sea," predicted Cal, dismally.

"Anyhow, it's better than being locked up on the 'Sea Rover.'"

"It is the difference between being at liberty to go without being able, and being able to go without being at liberty," was Cal's response.

"Say, what's the matter with ripping up a couple of thwarts, and paddling?"

This suggestion came from Val, and was adopted

at once. The thwarts were not fastened, and furnished an extremely awkward means of propulsion. With Cal on one side at the bow, and Val on the other, aft, *à la* canoe, some semblance of speed was presently attained; but owing to the obscurity, it was difficult to tell either their speed or the nature of the course they were taking. A thin mist lay low on the surface of the water, and shut out from view the dark island shapes that had been discernible from the elevated pilot-house of the steam-yacht. For aught they knew, the boat might be describing a continual circle.

"Hark!" Val suddenly said, stopping work after a quarter hour of vigorous paddling. "I heard something."

Both listened intently. Out of the gloom and mist sounded the steady churning of a propeller, and the seething of water that denoted the approach of a steamer.

"Shall we hail her?" queried Cal, in his eagerness standing up.

"Not on your life!" Val retorted instantly, as he strained his eyes for some sign of a light. "It may be the 'Rover' looking for us."

"What a confounded state of affairs," grumbled Cal. "Kidnaped; escaped from kidnapers; open boat; no oars; steamer goes by; don't dare to hail for fear of being kidnaped again. I tell you, Val," he continued, with emphasis, "the woes of this yacht cruise are getting rather overgrown."

Before Val could reply, a dark shape loomed up before them in the mist. The side lights of a steamer showed fair, while another light that looked like a bull's-eye lantern gleamed between the colored lights.

"Paddle, old man," ejaculated Val, grasping his thwart. "Paddle for your life. She'll be on us in a minute."

"Paddle!" retorted Cal, contemptuously. "*You* can paddle; *I'm* going to holler." And a fierce "Ahoy there! stop, or you'll run us down," came from his lusty lungs, that might have been heard for half a mile.

On came the steamer. She was nearer than the boys thought. They heard the tinkle of the engine room bell, and the propeller churned fiercely on the reverse.

Before them loomed up a knife-like prow. It seemed about to cut the rowboat down. Val prepared to jump one way—Cal the other; anything to escape being knocked senseless against the steamer's hull, and drowning, helpless, a moment after.

But the helmsman knew his business, and the bow veered sharply aside, missing the small boat by a few scant feet. The steamer stopped.

"Halloo!" hailed Val. "What boat is that?"

"Steam-yacht 'Petrel,'" came the reply, after what seemed an unnecessarily long pause.

"Can you lend us a pair of oars?" asked Val.

On the "Petrel's" lower deck a group was dimly

discernible. The yacht had run past, and was slowly backing up.

"Can't spare any," was the reply. "Come aboard, and we'll set you ashore."

A line was then thrown, and the rowboat pulled alongside. Val and Cal climbed over the rail to find a surprise awaiting them. Into their faces a lantern was thrust, and then, before resistance was possible, they were seized, bound hand and foot, and thrust into the cabin, Val's revolver being taken from him.

Here they lay, at full length on the floor, while the "Sea Rover's" crew, who had retaken their former prisoners with guile, put the yacht again on her course.

It would be perfectly natural for persons in such a situation as Val and Cal found themselves, to be at least apprehensive regarding their captors' intentions. But Val, in relating his experiences to me, stated that both Cal and himself were so incensed at themselves for being recaught in so simple a manner, that they gave hardly a thought at the first to what fate might hold in store for them.

A single lamp illuminated the cabin, and doubtless their captors kept a close watch from without; but for a long time they were left to themselves.

The yacht alternately went ahead and lay quiet. Sounds finally indicated the putting off of the boat; and after a long wait, it returned; but there was nothing to tell them in what part of the bay the "Sea Rover" was.

After the boat's return, the engine started once more, and soon the increased rocking of the yacht showed they were leaving the sheltering islands for the open sea. Then the engines stopped again, and the "Sea Rover" tossed lazily on the deep-sea swell.

But long before this time the boys' wrath had subsided so they could look the situation squarely in the face. So closely together they lay that it was possible to converse in tones that could not be heard outside, and for many minutes they discussed every phase of their misadventure.

Every line of discussion ended in perplexity. "Why did they take us?" and "What will they do with us?" were two sphinx-like riddles that baffled solution.

"Bangs is at the bottom of this," exclaimed Val, with a sudden inspiration.

"Then it's that ghastly evergreen business," groaned Cal.

At this juncture the cabin was invaded by no less a person than the Major. His face wore a smile that was doubtless intended to be conciliating; but to Val and Cal it seemed sardonic.

"Talk of the devil——" began Cal, at sight of Bangs.

"And he appears," finished Val, with such emphasis that the Major overheard.

"Eh?" he inquired. "What's that you say?" He stalked into the center of the cabin, and gazed down upon his captives.

"You can shuffle right out of here, you scamp," exclaimed Val, his wrath again rising, now that an object had appeared upon which he could fitly vent it. "We know you're at the bottom of this dirty business without your strutting around in here.

"Kindly explain," he continued bitterly, "now that you have us where you appear to want us, what you did it for, and what you propose to do with us."

Bangs did not immediately reply. He severed the cords that confined his captives' ankles, and assisted each to a chair, leaving their wrists still tied.

"I want to talk with you, briefly, and right to the point," he announced, when this partial release had been accomplished.

"We're waiting," growled Cal.

"In the first place, your condition is due to circumstances over which I had no control," said the Major, after evidently casting about for the best way to broach the information which he thought it necessary to impart.

The faces of his auditors plainly showed incredulity at this announcement.

"I want you to distinctly understand," went on their burly captor, seating himself with his elbows on the cabin table, and gazing earnestly across at his hearers, "that you are completely in our power."

The Major waited a moment for this statement to soak in.

"Secondly," he continued impressively, "you will be obliged to accept our hospitality for a short time."

"Is *this* your hospitality?" sneered Cal, indicating his bound wrists.

"That is something we will try to remedy," returned Bangs, suavely. "Hear me through."

Val was on the point of speaking, but restrained himself.

"Thirdly, *we shall keep you until it suits our convenience to let you go.* We hold no malice against you — we don't intend to harm you. Goodness knows," continued the Major, with a deprecatory gesture, "that we don't want you, any more than you want us. It is grim necessity that forces us to this step."

"What do you want of us?" asked Cal. "What do you think you will make us do, if you can hold us?"

"Don't worry about our holding you," retorted Bangs, sharply. "We don't ask a thing of you except to endure our company, eat our grub, sleep in our bunks, and enjoy yourselves. I offer no explanations whatever. It is enough to say you've got to go.

"I wish to know if, understanding that we do, can, and will keep you secure prisoners, you'll go along peaceably, and thereby save yourselves a hard time?"

"How long do you intend to keep us?" ques-

tioned Cal, striving hard to hold his feelings in check.

"And where are you taking us? " added Brandon.

"I can't tell you," declared the Major, bluntly, "but I will say that temporarily we shall take you beyond the sight of the world."

CHAPTER XIV

BANGS MAKES A PROPOSITION

In the short pause following his last surprising remark, Major Bangs lighted a cigar, evidently intending to allow his auditors time to digest his remarks. When the weed was going to his satisfaction, he resumed:—

"We make you this proposition ——"

"Wait," interposed Val, forcefully. "Tell us what you are going to do with Sumner Parker and my yacht."

"Parker will soon be aboard with you," declared Bangs. "As for the sailboat, we — well — it's in safe hands. We have no use for it. It's all right."

"Will it be left at Pod Island?" questioned Val, eagerly.

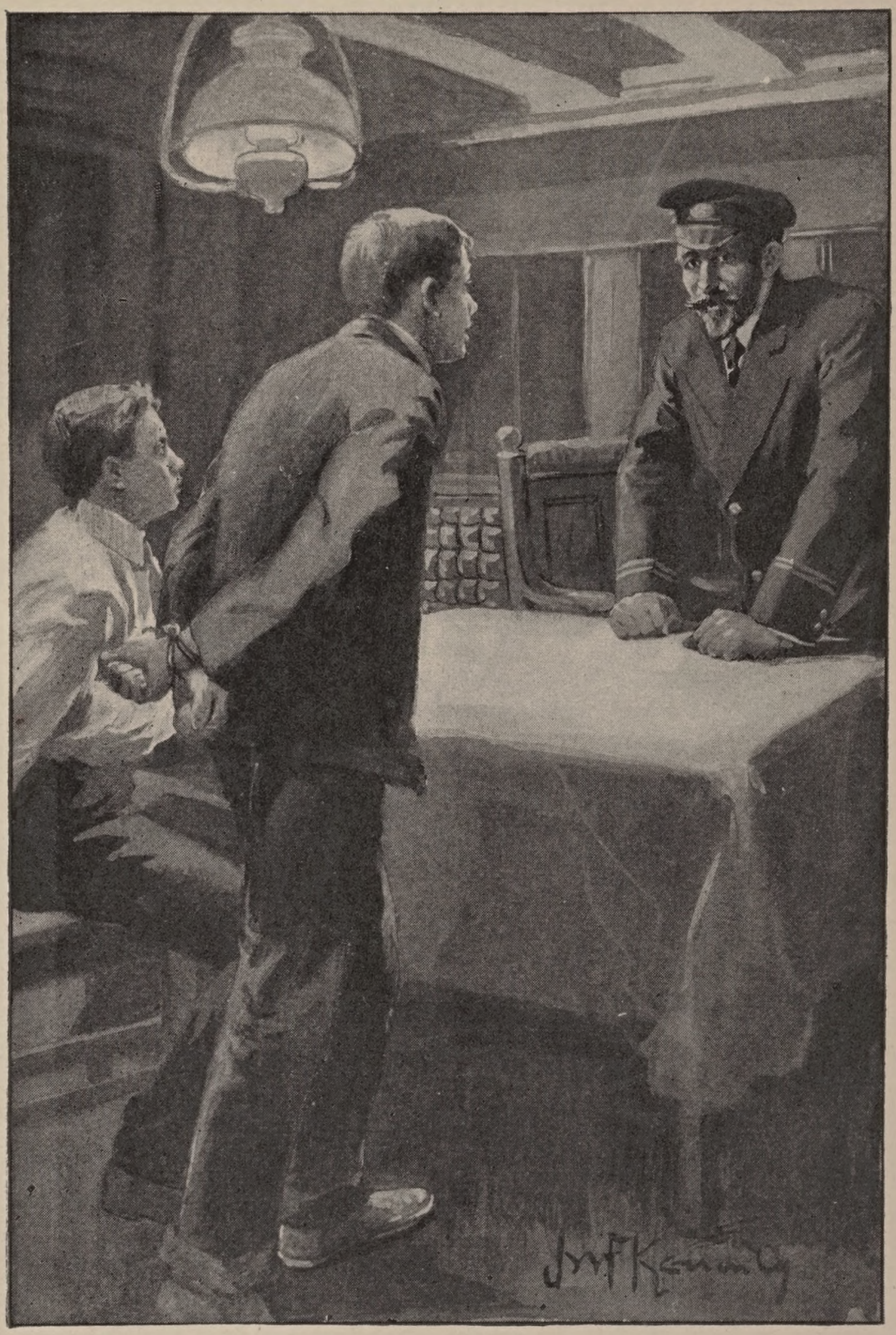
"Certainly."

Bangs made this declaration with such apparent sincerity that Val believed him, rascal though the Major had shown himself to be.

"We make you a proposal," Bangs went on, resuming the thread of his remarks, "which, under the circumstances, is exceedingly generous."

Val sniffed contemptuously.

"Remember," admonished Bangs, sharply, "that



"'YOU BIG RUFFIAN,' HE SHOUTED, 'I'LL SEE YOU HANGED FIRST.'"

we are armed — you aren't; you are few — we are many; we've got you fast — you can't go till we allow you; and if you are the sensible fellows I take you to be, you'll jump at my offer.

"Pledge your oath not to attempt to escape till we set you at liberty, and you shall have the freedom of the yacht, and when we go ashore ——"

"We go ashore, then, do we?" This from Cal.

"Yes," acknowledged Bangs, "we shall spend most of the time comfortably on shore, where you'll have the range of our quarters, plenty to eat, books and papers to read, with fishing thrown in.

"What do you say?" he finally demanded.

For a moment no one spoke, but finally Val's temper got the better of him.

"So you want us to consent to being abducted, do you?" he exclaimed in a hard, tense voice. "You calmly ask us to break up a yacht cruise and let you carry us off, 'temporarily, beyond the sight of the world.' Not only that," he went on, his anger rising with every sentence, "but you want us to promise not to try to escape, so you won't have the trouble of guarding us; and call it generous treatment because you're willing to take our word for our actions.

"You big ruffian," he shouted, in a tone of wrathful loathing, suddenly rising and confronting the Major, who also rose in some astonishment at the unexpected outburst, "I'll see you hanged before I agree to such a thing."

"Think it over — think it over," ejaculated Bangs, hurriedly moving toward the port cabin door, and evidently anxious to get away from a distasteful scene. "I give you an hour to talk it over and decide. Don't be hasty. Cool off a little and think intelligently. On your decision your personal comfort for perhaps a month depends."

Bangs paused with a hand on the door-knob. Val strode up to him.

"What will the Stroudport police do," he asked harshly, "when they learn that something remarkably like a coffin box was loaded on the 'Sea Rover' at one o'clock Tuesday morning? That some one was paid a hundred dollars for 'doing the job,' and told to keep his mouth shut if he would keep out of difficulties?"

"What do you mean?" gasped Bangs, starting back with a slightly whitened face.

"I mean the 'evergreen plant,'" retorted the skipper of the "Spitfire."

But at this interesting crisis came an interruption. For some time past the rumble of thunder had been audible, though scarcely noticed by the occupants of the cabin.

Now came a blinding flash and a stunning thunderclap.

"Come out here, Bangs," shouted a voice from the deck. "There's a squall coming down on us, and Jones is not here yet."

The Major recovered from the momentary per-

turbation which Val's words had undoubtedly caused him. He hastily left the cabin, firing a parting shot ere the door closed.

"You *know too much.*"

"If you want my honest opinion, old man," said Cal, in a tone of remonstrance, as his companion came and leaned dejectedly against the table, "I think it's blamed poor diplomacy to stir Bangs up like that for nothing."

"It gave us the clue to the whole business," retorted Val.

"I fail to see how."

"Bangs said, 'You know too much,' didn't he?"

Cal assented.

"That tells why we're here," was Val's decided comment. "Bangs is the head of a gang, and somehow we have been unlucky enough to stumble upon their secrets. Rather than give up the dirty job they're at, they intend to put us out of the way, so we can't interfere with their plans until their work is done.

"I suppose," he added with grim humor, "we ought to be grateful that they don't knife us and chuck us overboard. It would save them trouble. But Bangs is too great a moral coward to kill us."

"I hope so," said Cal, fervently.

A second vivid flash of lightning illumined the cabin, followed by another ear-splitting thunderclap. Then came the squall. Such a torrent of rain and wind struck the yacht that for the instant

she heeled far over under its impact. In alarm, both Val and Cal took a position at the side windows and peered anxiously into the darkness. The lightning momentarily revealed a waste of heaving sea, lashed by driving rain.

"Look, Cal, look!" cried Val, in sudden dismay, as he gazed intently into the storm.

To their startled eyes the lightning showed a sloop-yacht, under jib and double-reefed mainsail, her bows and lee rail buried in the surges, rushing past at express train speed, within biscuit toss of the "Sea Rover." Against the blackness of the night her white sails and hull stood clear-cut. The lightning gleamed on two blanched faces in the standing room.

Some one on the steam-yacht's deck uttered a fierce hail, to which there was no response. A gust of wind and rain swept the sloop past, and she vanished in the mists.

With pallid faces Val and Cal staggered back from the windows.

"Merciful heaven, Cal," cried Val, "that was the 'Spitfire.' "

"And Sumner," rejoined his companion, excitedly. "God help him to-night."

"Here, Cal," said Val, fiercely. "Try to untie my hands with your teeth. Are we to tamely stay here, while Sum is threatened with death at any moment? I've got to do something — something — or I shall burst."

Carroll's temperament was less excitable and

more cautious than his companion's, but the sight of Sumner in imminent peril had aroused him also. He knelt behind Val, and gnawed frantically at the cords that bound his wrists; but no sooner had he commenced operations than a young man entered the cabin. His clothes, which dripped with water, proclaimed the deck hand.

"Quit that," he said authoritatively. "Here, you," he went on, indicating Cal, "sit here." He led Carroll to a seat on one side the cabin.

Val he forced to a chair on the opposite side, and adjuring them to keep their positions, the young fellow withdrew. Evidently he was standing guard over them. The ease with which Val and Cal had escaped before had apparently taught the yachtsmen a lesson.

At the moment the "Spitfire" dashed past the "Sea Rover's" engines had begun moving, and in the midst of the squall the boat went about and started apparently in pursuit of the sailboat. The storm was furious in its might, but the stanch steamer rode the angry waters like a duck.

"My heavens!" groaned Val, in mental agony, as he listened to the shrieking of the wind. "What will become of poor Sum?"

And right there an inaudible prayer went up from both their hearts that He who holds the seas in the hollow of His hand might protect their chum that night upon the raging ocean.

CHAPTER XV

VAL AND CAL DISAGREE

For some minutes there was no conversation in the cabin of the "Sea Rover." Indeed, so great was the tumult of the electrical storm that conversation would have been difficult; but each youth was plunged in gloomy consideration of their situation.

Gradually the thunder and lightning abated, though the wind did not fall one jot. A nasty sea was rising, before which the yacht raced swiftly.

As the minutes passed a deep frown settled upon the face of Val Brandon; while over the features of Carroll Morse gradually stole a look of actual relief.

"I say accept," exclaimed the latter, finally.

"Accept what?" queried Val, rousing himself.

"Why, Bangs' proposition, of course. What else is there to accept?"

"My dear fellow, have you lost your senses?" Val exclaimed, gazing at his mate in astonishment.

"No, I think not," was Cal's firm response. "Shan't you agree?"

"Agree?" echoed Val, fiercely. "Most certainly not.

"Why, old man," he went on, "do you take stock in all the poppycock Bangs tried to stuff into us?"

"I think it had several grains of truth in it," was Cal's reply. "We're certainly in their power, and unarmed. If they keep us a month, it will be terribly irksome to be trussed up like a turkey all the time. We've got to take our medicine; why not take it as comfortably as possible?"

Cal spoke in tones that evinced a settled determination.

"True," admitted Val, no less earnestly, "they've got us pinned down *now;* but what does that signify? One hour may turn the tables.

"You see, Cal," continued the skipper of the "Spitfire," persuasively, "Bangs shows his weakness by his anxiety to conciliate us. There are not more than five men aboard — Bangs, the mate Bruce, the engineer, the deck hand, and a possible fireman.

"Again, having us on their hands was not included in their calculations. At the business of standing guard they're not up to snuff. Mark my words, there'll be some hole to crawl out of. A month is a long time."

Val's sentences showed that his mind was also fixed.

"I shan't agree to his proposal under any circumstances," he concluded. "You, of course, can do as you like."

"The scamps caught us," retorted Cal, gloomily, "and I believe they are able to hold us. I propose to take things as easy as I can."

"So be it," was Val's rejoinder. "Go your way; I'll go mine."

"Not at all, my dear fellow," Cal remonstrated. "It's simply a difference of judgment. And who knows," he added in a low tone, "but it may be our best move to disagree on this point?"

"We certainly do disagree, but I fail to see what good can come of it," Val declared. "I intend to resist to the end, and escape at the first opportunity."

Promptly at the expiration of the hour Major Bangs entered the cabin. He had donned a suit of yellow oilskins, and a sou'wester, and water trickled from every fold and wrinkle as he confronted his prisoners.

"Well?" he demanded, in a tone whose anxiety was illy concealed.

"I accept," returned Cal, quietly.

"That's sensible," affirmed Bangs, in a tone of relief. "You, Brandon, of course do the same. Very well; we'll have those strings off in a few——"

"Hold on!" Val interrupted. "Not so fast. I *do not* accept."

"Whew!" said Bangs, explosively, gazing in doubt from one youth to the other. He was totally unprepared for a difference of opinion between his captives; it rather nonplussed him. Certainly he had expected Val and Cal to act together.

"What do you mean by this?" he inquired in quick suspicion.

"Just what I say," retorted Cal. "You made a proposal—I accept. What is simpler?"

"He does you the credit, Bangs," interposed Val, "to take some stock in what you say. As for me, on principle I wouldn't agree to any proposal you might make, for I could bank on there being something concealed behind it."

Bangs took a turn about the cabin. Were the boys acting a part, or were they sincere in their disagreement?

"Well, so be it," he finally said. "At least there'll be only one to keep tied up under guard.

"Brandon," he added, with warmth, pausing before Val and eyeing him sharply, "you're a bigger fool than I took you to be."

"That's my lookout," returned Val, curtly.

"Don't fool yourself by thinking Morse will be able to let you loose, either. Just jot that down."

"I take my own chances; he takes his," was Brandon's brief reply.

At Bangs' request Cal rose, and steadied himself against the yacht's plunges against the table, while the Major severed the cord that fastened his wrists.

"Now raise your right hand."

With some effort, for his arms were stiff from confinement, Cal managed to get the indicated member upon a level with his head, and held it wavering there.

"Do you solemnly swear," asked Bangs, with a glitter in his eyes that boded no good to a perjurer,

"to make no effort to escape from us nor to assist Brandon to escape, until we see fit to let you go?"

"Hold on," remonstrated Cal, "I didn't agree to that clause about Brandon."

"That or nothing," was Bangs' decisive reply. "We'll have no collusion between you chaps. If you are on parole and he is not, we won't have you conniving at his escape."

In momentary hesitation Cal glanced at his chum; but Val, who viewed the proceedings with high disapproval, merely said: —

"Hoe your own row, Cal."

"Then," said Cal, "I swear, on condition that I have my liberty as specified."

"You are free," said Bangs. "But recollect," sternly," if you attempt to slip us, we will shoot you like a dog."

However, this threat did not terrify Cal. If shooting had been their purpose, his captors would have done it at the start, and saved themselves all this trouble.

"For your part, Brandon," Bangs said, "you're certainly making a great mistake; but if you change your mind, the proposition is still open to you."

He removed the cord from Val's wrists, and bringing his hands in front, slipped on a pair of handcuffs.

"Thank your lucky stars," he continued, when this was done, "that we are so considerate.

"You fellows will occupy the same stateroom you had before" — Bangs smiled slightly as he said

this—"and I advise you to turn in if you want any sleep to-night. Sorry, but I fear Brandon will be obliged to sleep with his coat on."

With this he left the cabin, and the boys, thoroughly worn out, turned in. Despite the dangers of the situation, exhausted nature asserted herself, and the two were soon sleeping soundly.

Meanwhile the "Sea Rover" churned along through the tempestuous night. The squall proved to be the forerunner of a genuine southeasterly storm. From the southwest, where it had first blown, the wind gradually drew around into the southeast, and kicked up a choppy sea that tossed the yacht about like a chip.

Although a keen lookout was constantly kept, nothing was seen of the "Spitfire" after her dash past in the height of the squall, although the steamer had immediately started in pursuit.

It might have been four o'clock in the morning when Marshall, the engineer, worn and weary, slipped on the iron steps leading to the stoke-hole, and struck his head violently against the ironwork. Shortly afterward he was found insensible upon the floor of the fire room. All efforts to revive him proved futile. He lay in his bunk, in a state of complete stupefaction.

The yacht was now without an engineer. To lessen the number of hands, no fireman had been shipped, the engineer himself, with the occasional aid of the deck hand, looking out for the fires. So it

fell out that there was no other member of the crew who had any but the baldest knowledge of the engine or how to run the boiler.

A short time after the engineer met with his mishap, the boys' stateroom was invaded by Major Bangs, who exhibited every sign of alarm.

"Wake up here. Wake up," he shouted, shaking both yachtsmen with no gentle hand.

"Wake up. Do either of you know how to run an engine?"

"Val does," replied Cal, drowsily. "He does — I don't. Let me alone, can't you? I'm tired to death."

"Come, Brandon; wake up," adjured Bangs.

"What do you want?" Val was finally awake.

"Our engineer is hurt. We want you to run the engine, if you can."

"I won't do it," declared Val, with vigor. "Do your own dirty work. Kindly get out of here and let me sleep."

"But none of us knows how to get water into the boiler," returned Bangs, in great excitement. "It's nearly empty. If you don't help us out, Brandon, we'll be blown up or swamped inside of ten minutes!"

CHAPTER XVI

"FIRE" ON THE "SEA ROVER"

WHETHER Major Bangs' startling statement was strictly true or not, there was not the least doubt that he believed it himself, and he succeeded in producing a decided impression upon his auditors; so decided, in fact, that Val slid from his bunk to the floor without further ado, and Cal, suddenly finding himself wide awake, arose with such celerity that his head thumped smartly against the upper berth.

"Take these off," said Val, extending his fettered wrists. Bangs eagerly complied.

Scarce pausing to resume the outer clothing that had been discarded so short a time previous, the trio made their way along the heaving, wind-and-rain-swept decks to the engine room.

The sea was much rougher than when the boys had turned in. At the first, the change of wind had produced a chop; but the strength of the storm had finally changed the trend of the swell, and out of the southeast a succession of huge foam-crested rollers came tumbling. Stanch as the yacht was, it would have been madness to attempt anything but keeping her head to the storm. Like a bird she soared up

the steep sides of the billows, to plunge like a shot down the slope beyond, while her engines raced like mad as the water fell away from her stern and left the propeller for the instant exposed.

Well drenched, Val, Cal, and Bangs burst into the engine room. Fenderson, the deck hand, was clinging to the hand-rail of the stoke-hole steps, and looked extremely apprehensive.

At Bangs' orders he had opened the furnace door and closed the draughts. In consequence, the steam-gauge was dropping steadily.

Val's experience in marine engineering had been gained during a summer's employment on an island steamer in Stroudport Bay. His position had been that of clerk; but, being naturally of a mechanical turn of mind, he had ingratiated himself with the engineer, who good-naturedly explained the practical workings of his engines, condensers, pumps, and boiler. On several dull days, when travel was light and his duties not onerous, Val had been allowed to take charge, for a short time, of the throttle, under the supervision of the engineer.

"If you know anything about this," exclaimed Bangs, indicating the machinery with a nervous gesture, "for heaven's sake set it right."

Val's first glances were at the steam and water gauges. The first showed but fifty pounds pressure; the second was so affected by the yacht's pitching that it was difficult to determine how much water the boiler actually contained. The machinery he

found to be of a pattern almost identical with that he was familiar with.

"Shut your furnace door, and rouse up the fire," he called to the dejected deck hand, who promptly complied. Val then started the injector, and in the course of ten minutes, both gauges showed a decided improvement.

Meanwhile, having oiled up thoroughly, Val applied himself to relieving as much as possible the strain brought on the engines by the racing of the propeller; for when, as the yacht pitched down a wave, the screw was clear of the water, the engines, relieved of their load, worked furiously until the vibrations shook the hull from stem to stern. A careful partial closing of the throttle when she began to race, and reopening when the propeller was again submerged, helped matters wonderfully, though it was monotonous work.

Val, however, was enough of a mechanic to know that the propeller shaft might develop a flaw and be twisted off by these terrific starts and slow-downs, and enough of a seaman to foretell what would become of the "Sea Rover" if she lost her motive power and rolled into the trough of the waves.

Bangs stood an anxious spectator of it all, and when he was able to see an improvement, worked his way over to Val and said:—

"Will you take charge here for the present? Remember, it means your life, as well as ours."

If this request had been made a few short hours

previous, it would have been refused with scorn. But conditions had changed. Val merely nodded.

"Yes, if you'll take your man away and let Morse fire."

This arrangement was finally made. Cal took up the shovel, and Bangs escorted Fenderson to the wheel-house, where a man was needed to relieve the worn-out mate.

Some time later Bangs came stumbling in with a piping hot breakfast for the boys, which proved very acceptable.

The hours slowly passed. By nine o'clock the fury of the storm had considerably abated. Though the wind still blew a gale, and the rain fell heavily, yet the sea was not so tempestuous. The yacht did not pitch so violently, nor the engines show such a tendency to race.

It must be admitted that Val and Cal now found themselves extremely weary. Blankets were procured, and half-hour naps indulged in by each in alternation for some time, till both of the boys were considerably refreshed.

At noon Bangs announced dinner; but instead of having it brought to the engine room, the boys ate, one after the other, at the saloon table. By three in the afternoon the sea had gone down so that it was deemed prudent to put the yacht on her course, as nearly as it could be determined, though rain still fell and the wind still blew.

So presently the "Sea Rover" was cutting the waves

diagonally in an easterly direction, and threatening to put her stack under with every roll.

Night closed down over a dismal, rain-swept sea, but the yacht steamed steadily onward. Some hours passed, when another danger threatened. The coal supply was running short. Bangs, who made periodic visits to the engine room, was speedily made acquainted with this fact. With a perturbed face, he hurried to the pilot-house to consult Bruce.

But scarcely had he left, when the yacht's rolling materially subsided, and the gong rang to stop. The "Sea Rover" had run into smooth water.

Closing the throttle, Val slid back the starboard door, and both boys emerged on deck. Peering through the gloom and drenching rain, they dimly distinguished a dark mass on the water off to windward, and from it a light feebly glimmered.

"We've run into the lee of some island," exclaimed Cal. "See that light?"

As soon as he understood the yacht's situation, Val hastily returned to the engine room. A plan for escape had entered his head, and he hurried to put it into execution.

Seizing a huge wad of cotton-waste, such as is used for cleaning machinery, he saturated it with cylinder oil. Then, leaping down into the stoke-hole, he deposited the cotton among the coal at the farthest end of the port bunker. A match was hastily applied, and when the oil was fairly burning,

a second wad of dry waste was piled on the blaze to create a dense smudge.

For a moment the young skipper watched his fire to assure himself it would burn; then he climbed to the engine room.

"Huh," sniffed Cal, entering at that moment. "Something's afire. I smell smoke."

"Sh-h!" returned his companion, as he bolted the starboard door. "Good-by, old man. I'm going to try and get ashore. You'd better go forward and stay a few minutes. I've started a harmless smudge below there to take attention from my movements. Or will you come with me?"

"I can't, Val," replied Cal, with deep regret. "Good luck to you. I hope you'll succeed in escaping; and then come back for the gang."

The two clasped hands, and Cal went forward.

At that moment the gong rang for half-speed ahead. Val stepped out on the port deck, and closed the door after him. Bangs and Bruce were in the wheel-house; the engineer was still unconscious in his berth, and the deck hand was sleeping the sleep of the weary near him.

Ding! Ding!

The mate was getting impatient. He repeated his signal. The answer was startling and unexpected.

"Fire! Fire!" shrieked Val, with all his lungs. "Fire in the engine room!"

Rattle — slam — bang! The pilot-house door

slid open. Footsteps and ejaculations of alarm sounded as Bangs and Bruce hurried to the scene of the trouble. Down the starboard ladder scrambled Bangs — Bruce the port.

As for Val, he hurried aft and waited, breathless, while Bangs stormed for a moment at the locked starboard door. When that worthy had run around by the forward deck to the port door of the engine room, the young skipper stole noiselessly ahead on the starboard side to where the tender hung from the midship davits. With his heart in his mouth Val cut the lashings, and lowered the boat, one end at a time, till it rested upon the water.

Within the engine room a terrific coughing and spluttering was going on as Bangs and Bruce investigated the "fire"; but save for the utterance of a grim chuckle, Val paid no heed.

This time the oars were in the tender. Brandon entered the boat, cast off the falls, shipped the oars, and pulled hurriedly away toward the black lump on the water to windward.

He had gone perhaps a hundred yards, when, looking back, he saw the engine room door open and two forms were silhouetted against the lighted interior.

Val paused a moment, for he *could not* resist the temptation, and threw back a sarcastic farewell.

"Good-by, Major. Ta-ta!"

CHAPTER XVII

VAL GOES ASHORE

WHEN Bruce slid back the port engine room door, he found the room blue with smoke. Loudly he called for the engineer and fireman, and, getting no response, entered, followed presently by Bangs.

"Where's the fire?" was the Major's anxious query. "Why don't you start the fire pump?"

"Why don't I start a camp meeting?" retorted Bruce, ironically, as he descended to the stoke-hole. "I think the fire's down here."

Bruce was not long in finding the smoldering cotton-waste, and with much choking and spluttering, gathered it upon a shovel and hurried upon deck.

"There's your fire," he ejaculated, contemptuously, as he tossed the contents of the shovel over the rail.

"What does it mean?" cried Bangs, perplexed.

"That you'd better look out for Brandon and Morse."

Bangs smote himself on the head.

"Blast me for a fool!" he exclaimed, and raising his voice, called loudly for Val and Cal.

"Here," returned Cal, walking to the engine room

from the forward deck, where he had been berating himself for what he termed his "foolheadedness."

"Oh, you're here, are you?" was Bangs' relieved expression. "Where's Brandon?"

"How should I know? Am I his keeper?"

"See to the boat, Bruce," instantly shouted Bangs, thoroughly aroused.

Bruce crossed the engine room, unbolted and opened the starboard door, and stepped on deck, followed by the excited Major.

The davits were empty. The falls swung to and fro in the wind.

"Gone!" exclaimed Bangs, fiercely, ripping out an oath. "The scamp's gone!"

Leaning on the rail, the pair for a few moments gazed anxiously into the gloom, and as they looked and listened, Val's sarcastic farewell came to their ears.

Bangs danced about for a moment in an ecstasy of rage.

"Drop your anchor, Bruce," he finally said, controlling his feelings with an effort. "We'll stop *here*. I'll have that boy if I have to chase him a thousand miles."

Events on the yacht now followed each other in quick succession. Fenderson was routed out of his bunk; the anchor was dropped; the fires banked under the boiler; Bangs escorted Cal to the cabin, and greatly to that youth's indignation and dismay, forthwith handcuffed him.

"Shut up," the Major responded to Cal's remon-

strances. "I take no more chances. That agreement is off."

Leaving Cal a prey to the gloomiest of thoughts, Bangs went forward and held a hasty consultation with the mate.

"You're dead sure you don't know where we are?" he began.

"We are near our island," his companion replied; "but who's to know if this is it?"

"Brandon will be ashore by this time," said Bangs, growing agitated. "If this isn't our island, do you realize what that will mean?"

"Yes, he'll try to set the officers on us; but we can checkmate his game."

"How?"

"Why, if there's to be a scrimmage, we open the battle ourselves."

"Explain yourself," demanded the Major, beginning to catch the drift of the mate's remarks.

"Brandon has the dots on us," went on Bruce, "*if* we let him go quietly ashore and tell his yarn. Of course, we can clear out; but that means the loss of the whole game."

Bangs nodded.

"Now *I* say chase him up; raise a howl after him; d'ye understand? We do the arousing of the authorities — cry 'stop thief,' as it were — bluff it out. Then his story will go at a discount, and we'll retake him on some pretext or other. That's my idea. What do you think?"

"A close chance, but worth trying. But kindly inform me how we will get ashore?"

"There's a life-raft aboard, fitted with oars; that will answer."

From the "Rover's" deck a few moments later a rocket burned its fiery path skyward. A second, and a third, followed, and meantime Bruce and the deck hand placed the life-raft in the water.

Bangs was initiating the plan of arousing the supposed inhabitants, and after each burning messenger ascended, looked and listened for signs of life from shore.

The light which was at first visible presently went out; but reappeared almost instantly, and moved about in such an erratic manner that Bangs became convinced some one was approaching the shore with a lantern.

"We've started somebody," he announced triumphantly, as Bruce came forward to say the raft was ready. "D'ye see that light?"

For some moments the light pursued its wayward course, then disappeared completely; and although another rocket was sent up and all hands looked and listened for some minutes, nothing was seen or heard indicating life ashore. Then Bangs and the deck hand boarded the raft.

Val tugged away lustily at the oars until it became apparent he was nearly ashore. The rain now ceased, and thinning clouds allowed the moonlight to sift through a little. What had at first been only a

black blotch upon the sea rapidly resolved itself into land, with patches of woods dimly visible here and there.

Directly ahead was a high wooded promontory. Running in by this Val found himself in the mouth of a deep natural harbor. Not caring to land in a tangle of underbrush, he rowed along until finally the tender grated upon a sandy beach at the head of the land-locked bay.

Leaping ashore, he drew the light boat well up out of reach of the tide; and while he worked, a sudden "whish," accompanied by a flash of light, startled him. It was Bangs' first rocket.

Considerably puzzled by what seemed a very foolish move on the part of his late captors — for under the circumstances Val thought it behooved them to keep as dark as possible — the young skipper now looked about for the best way inland.

A second and third rocket burned flaming paths aloft; but only served to quicken Val's movements. Back of the narrow beach was a high bluff, up which Brandon climbed, to find himself presently in a tangle of dripping bayberry bushes. Soon, however, he stumbled into a path that made travel through the thickets much easier.

The light which had been visible from the yacht was nowhere to be seen; but of a sudden a loud "Halloo" came from the gloom ahead, and through the high bushes and sapling growth came glimpses of a light, dancing hither and thither like a will-o'-

the-wisp. As Val plunged forward, a man, carrying a lighted lantern, came hurrying around a sharp turn in the path, and collided forcibly with the young skipper.

The force of the collision sent Val staggering back. His assailant, flinging his lantern to one side, with a cry of "Howly murther!" toppled over into the bushes at the other.

There was a sudden "crack — crack," as the thicket yielded to the stranger's weight — a slipping, scratching sound, and a thud. Then a moment of utter stillness.

Val recovered himself, and peered excitedly about, little the worse for the encounter. The lantern had been extinguished by the fall, but his first act was to relight it.

There was a break in the bushes where the stranger had fallen, and now a very lusty groan told of his presence close at hand, and indicated that the shock had by no means killed him.

Moving in the direction of the groans, Val had not gone a foot from the path before he found himself on the edge of a pit, which the lantern showed to be some dozen feet square, and possibly two thirds as deep. Its edges were everywhere overhung by a tangled growth of bushes. The sides were stoned up. Evidently it was an old cellar.

At the bottom of this wet and dismal hole, with only the whiteness of his face visible in the dim light, sat the stranger.

"Halloo, there!" called Val. "Are you hurt?"

For an instant there was no reply. The man seemed to be taking an inventory of himself. Then came the answer in an unmistakable Irish brogue.

"Am Oi hurt, is it? Oh, not at all, at all. Oi jusht fell down here for fun, me bye. It's a way Oi have wid me."

At this ironical retort Val laughed outright.

"Hold on, there," he exclaimed, as the Irishman essayed to rise. "Wait a moment and I'll give you a lift."

The fallen man was evidently not much hurt. Brandon set down the lantern and lowered himself into the pit.

No sooner did he alight, with considerable force, at the bottom of the old cellar, than the ground opened beneath him, and despite frantic clutches at the edges of the orifice, he was precipitated feet first down a yawning, well-like shaft!

CHAPTER XVIII

AN OLD ENEMY REAPPEARS

As Val Brandon felt the ground of the old cellar yield under him, his first thought was that the decayed covering of some old well or cistern had broken beneath his weight. But after a straight drop of maybe ten feet, great was his joy to alight unhurt upon soft sand, instead of in a pool of water, as he half expected.

If meeting the Irishman had been a surprise, this later adventure was a complete astonishment. Pitch darkness surrounded him, and the air was stagnant and laden with the odor of decaying wood.

A match was hastily lighted. Its dim flare showed Val that he had tumbled into a subterranean passage, narrow and low, whose sides and top were boarded with half-decayed rough-hewn planks. Having gotten thus far in his inspection, his light went out.

"This *is* a go," he muttered, fumbling for more matches, of which, luckily, he had a generous supply. "Who would have thought— I wonder what in the world this tunnel is here for?

"Perhaps pirates—maybe smugglers—have been

here; but long ago," decided the captain of the "Spitfire," as he peered first in one direction, then the other.

The sandy floor of the passage showed no foot-print save his own; there was nothing to indicate recent occupancy. Overhead appeared a trap-door, now closed, and an arrangement of chains and weights connected with it told Val that it had closed automatically after he had fallen through. A ladder fastened against the wall led up to it.

But visions of smugglers, pirates, and stolen treasure, conjured up by the sight of the mysterious underground passage, vanished suddenly from Val's mind. Out went his third match, just as a voice overhead asked, in agitated and muffled tones:—

"Arrah there, beloo. Are yez kilt entoirely?"

The trap-door was pushed open with a creak of chains and weights.

"Am I hurt?" returned Val, remembering the Irishman's response to his own inquiry. "Oh, not at all. I just fell down here for fun. It's just a way I have with me."

"Thrue for yez," was the response, in a jolly tone. "But kin yez climb out?"

For answer Val scrambled up the ladder and regained the cellar. The trap, which swung either way, up or down, closed automatically after him.

"What kind of a hole is that down there, anyhow?" he demanded, when they had regained the path.

"Faith, an' I dunno. An ould well, Oi'm thinkin'.

Oi niver seen it befoor nor sinse, an' Oi've no wish to again.

"Oi say," he demanded suddenly, picking up the lantern, and thrusting it into Val's face. "An' who might you be?

"Yis," he went on, before Val could reply, "an' will yez tell me who's a-shootin' foireworruks off out to say?"

"That's the steam-yacht 'Sea Rover,'" replied Val, "and I want you to tell me where——"

He was not allowed to finish. The Irishman seized him about the waist, and executed a wild jig, in evident delight.

"At lasht, thank hivins, ye've arroived," he shouted delightedly, presently desisting from his jig, but slapping Val enthusiastically on the shoulder. "Begorra, an' glad it is Oi am to behold yez, an' me a-dyin' of loneliness on this shpooky ould oiland fur foive days a-runnin', wid niver a soul to shpake to at all."

The light of a great, unwelcome truth broke in upon Val's bewilderment.

"Holy smoke!" he muttered. "I'll bet dollars to doughnuts this is the very place Bangs was trying to reach.

"Then we've hit the right place, have we?" asked Val, in deep doubt what course to pursue, and parleying for time and information.

"This is Tower Oiland, as shure's me name is Mike Mecorrigan. An' whin's the Major to come ashore?"

"He may come at once, and perhaps not till morning," said Val, diplomatically. "I came ahead to make sure what place it was. Where do you live, and isn't there any one else on the island?"

"Niver a soul," replied Mike. "Come up to the house wid me. Shure it's but an ould ark, an' all fallin' to paces; but it's a trifle betther nor wet bushes. Begorra, an' it's good for sore eyes to behold yez."

Mike took the lead, and Val, in much perplexity of mind, followed. By leaving the yacht for the island, he had seemingly jumped from the frying-pan into the fire, for his actions would only serve to incense his recent captors, without improving his condition. Bangs would certainly manage to get ashore by daybreak. How was he to elude his clutches?

"At any rate," he thought, "I'll pump the Irishman to see what he knows of the Major's schemes, and trust to the future to take care of itself."

The pair presently emerged from the thickets into a grove of large trees. The moon, now visible, revealed in the midst of the grove a huge old stone house, two and a half stories high, with a tower rising at one corner, and a one-story wooden ell, or lean-to, at the back.

Though the light was dim and uncertain, Val could see that everything was in a state of dilapidation. Some of the windows were boarded up, others were destitute of glass, while the lean-to seemed to shrink away from the house as though afraid of it.

"What an old ark!"

Mike kicked open the front door without ceremony, and ushered his companion inside, where the appearance of the interior fully justified Val's exclamation.

In the hallway, that ran from front to back, the walls, once plastered, now showed in myriad places the split boards that had served as lathing. The staircase that formerly led to the second floor was tumbled in ruins. Cobwebs hung in festoons everywhere.

"Shure an' it *is* an ould ark," responded Mike, leading the way into a side room. Here the walls were also denuded of plaster, but the cobwebs had been swept down, doubtless by Mike.

At one side was a fireplace, almost big enough to take in a small cottage. A big box, a chair or two of modern pattern, an oil stove, a mattress and blankets on the floor, and a few other things, evidently brought by Mike, were revealed by the light of the lantern which Mr. Mecorrigan placed on the box.

"Upon me sowl," he declared, as Val gazed about the dismal place, "this be for-rty shades worrus than me ancistral palace on the ould sod. But take a sate."

Mike lighted a stubby pipe, and sat down to enjoy a smoke and a talk; and Val was on the point of accepting his companion's invitation when his ear caught a sound outside.

There came a loud banging at the door — which Mike had carefully fastened after their entrance. A voice — none other than Major Bangs' — uttered an emphatic summons.

"Open up here. Open up, I say! Mike, you dunderhead, wake up and open this door!"

CHAPTER XIX

VAL AND THE MAJOR TRY CONCLUSIONS

MAJOR BANGS was ashore, and his loud tones boded no good for Val Brandon if he should be caught in his present position.

Uttering an exclamation of surprise, Mike started to his feet and went to the door, and Val realized that he had no time to lose. The room had two doors, one leading into the hall, by which he had come, and another at the back, which was closed. To this latter door he gave his attention; it was fastened. He glanced at the windows; they were securely shuttered, or boarded up.

But the ceiling overhead gave him an idea. In the center was a square hole, fitted with a cover on the upper side. Val had not the slightest idea what was overhead, nor did he waste time in considering that point. To escape from the Major he must act, and at once.

Sliding the box to a point immediately under the scuttle, he placed a chair upon it, and climbed to the top of the pile. Here he could reach the opening, and found that the cover yielded to his hand. He shoved it aside, and grasping the edges of the casing, gave a vigorous jump upward.

Meanwhile the Major gained entrance to the house, and entered the room just as Val's feet left the chair.

Val's head and shoulders were indistinguishable in the dusk, but Bangs had no difficulty in recognizing his late prisoner, and he uttered an exclamation of exultation. But before he could make a movement to retard Brandon's ascent, that person's energetic movements upset the chair, the lantern was knocked from the box and extinguished, and everything was plunged in gloom.

"Bring a light, Mike," shouted Bangs. "Brandon is trying to escape. Hurry up."

"Faith, an' what are yez a-sayin'? " queried Mike, in wonder, groping his way into the room. "What in the worruld have yez gone and did wid the loight, and thot the only lanthern in the ould shebang?"

"Pick it up, and light it, quick. There's a fellow here we want to catch, and he's climbing up through a hole in the ceiling."

"Shure, an' he said he was one of the par-rty," exclaimed Mike, in surprise, as he fumbled for the lantern, "a-come on ahid to see if everything was all roight."

"And I suppose he pumped you of all you knew," growled the Major, angrily. "Hurry up with that light. You're slower than death."

"An' sorra a pump did he thry on me," responded Mike, soothingly, scratching a match, "for yez can't pump wather out of a dhry well."

The lantern was soon relighted, but the chimney had been broken by the fall, and the flame flickered and smoked dismally. Bangs seized it and ran back into the hall; but the staircase he looked for was not there.

"Aren't there any stairs in this heathenish place?" he inquired impatiently.

"Not a wan," replied Mike. "Nor ony illevator, aither."

"How do you get upstairs, then?"

"Begobs," said the Irishman, scratching his head, "I don't. Downstairs wor as much as me stummack could shtand, widout makin' nadeless excursions aloft."

"Put the chair on the table," Bangs ordered, stepping back into the room. The affair had now taken an aggravating turn, and he felt that valuable time was being lost.

The Irishman complied; the Major hastily climbed to the top of the pile, reached up and grasped the edges of the opening in the ceiling, and was about to follow Val into the darkness overhead. But suddenly his hands slipped from their hold, the chair twisted under his feet, and with a howl of pain, Bangs half fell, half jumped to the floor; over went the lantern again, and once more all was plunged in gloom, while a voice overhead was heard to remark:—

"Oh, come up, Major. Why don't you come up?"

"You just wait," gritted Bangs. "I will come up, and when I do you'll dance Jerusalem!"

Mike again lighted the lantern, and its dim light revealed the Major nursing his bruised fingers.

"Haven't you got a ladder somewhere?" he asked roughly, when a moment's examination had satisfied himself he was not seriously injured. "If you have, trot it out, and don't stand there gaping like a lunatic. I'll have that upstart out of there if I have to bring the house about his ears."

Thus adjured, Mike went out of doors, and presently returned dragging an ancient ladder, which was nothing more nor less than a long post with cross-pieces nailed upon it at intervals of every dozen inches.

"Hurry up," ordered Bangs, as sounds of crashing glass and splintering wood came from the second story. Mike quickly set up the ladder in the opening where the staircase had once been, and the Major prepared to ascend.

"Now, young Brandon," he muttered viciously, "we'll see who will laugh."

When Val climbed into the second story of the old house, the moonlight showed him a room as dilapidated as the one beneath, and of the same size. There was a single doorway, opening into a hallway corresponding to the one on the first floor.

Across the hall was another door, but a hasty trial of the latch — there were no knobs on any doors in the house he had yet seen — showed it to be fastened

His range on this floor was thus limited to the one room and the hallway.

During this hasty inspection, Bangs' angry tones were audible below, and Val now gave his attention to the movements of the enemy. Through the aperture in the floor of the room and the opening in the floor of the hall, where the staircase had once been, he could obtain glimpses of his foes whenever the lantern happened to be alight. It was at this juncture that Bangs had essayed to climb up, and had his knuckles well rapped as a result.

But Val clearly realized that his elusion of the Major would only be temporary, unless he escaped from the house, and sundry remarks uttered by that burly rascal while Mike was gone for the ladder did not tend to lessen the uneasiness the young yachtsman felt at his unpleasant position.

He was unarmed, while the Major, and probably all his gang, had weapons. Although he might keep them out of the second story for a while, yet he could not long resist, and now looked eagerly about for some way of escape.

He recalled that there was a one-story ell at the back of the mansion. Hurrying to the rear of the hallway, he peered through the window there, and found himself overlooking the sloping roof of the lean-to.

Across the lower edge of this roof stretched the long branch of a tree. Here appeared a way of escape, and he hastened to make use of it.

The ancient window sash was securely nailed in

place. The panes were small, and fully half the squares bristled with broken glass. Some sort of a cudgel was necessary to break out, and Val bethought himself of the scuttle cover. On his return through the hall with the article named, he caught a glimpse of Mike entering the hall below with the ladder. There was no mistaking the use to which Bangs intended putting it, and Val was sorely tempted to stand his ground and give him a hearty thumping with the scuttle cover as he came up.

Not stopping, however, to continue a resistance which he knew would in the end be disastrous, since Bangs must soon be reinforced by his confederates, Val returned to the window. A vigorous sweep with the cover cleared the sash of wood and glass.

It also hastened the Major's operations, for as Val put himself through the opening he had made, and paused momentarily after gaining the roof, glancing back he saw a head and shoulders suddenly rise into view through the aperture in the hall floor, while a voice shouted: —

"Stop, you rascal! Stop, I say!"

But after all that had occurred, Val could see in this remark no especial inducement to return. He crept cautiously down the wet and slippery roof to the branch. In almost the time it takes to tell it the branch was reached, and getting astride it, Val worked his way along toward the tree. A noise behind announced the Major's arrival at the window.

Ping! A bullet from the Major's revolver hurtled past, and Val promptly flattened himself on the limb. He would have risked a drop to the ground beneath, but in the shadow of the building the dusk was so deep that he could not tell what was under him.

"Brandon," the Major's voice quickly followed the pistol shot. "Brandon, come back here."

"Thank you, but I prefer to stay where I am," responded Val, again sitting up, since the Major showed an inclination to parley, but working slowly along the limb as he talked.

"Don't be a fool, Brandon," said the Major, persuasively.

"Advice is cheap," the yachtsman replied, wondering what was coming now.

"You might as well come to my terms first as last," went on the Major.

"What are your terms?" inquired Val, though he could guess the reply.

"Give yourself up, and promise not to escape. We'll give you plenty to eat, and the range of the island."

"And if I don't?" Val asked. He had now reached the tree, though so dim was the light he doubted if Bangs knew his position had been changed.

"If you do not," was Bangs' energetic response, "you will either starve or be shot on sight by the first one of us who catches you. Now will you come with us?"

"No," responded Val, boldly, as he set foot on a lower limb, preparatory to descending. "I'll starve or be shot first."

He swung himself lightly down, taking good care to keep the trunk of the tree between himself and the Major's pistol; but contrary to his expectations, there was no second shot — only a loud, sarcastic laugh.

The next moment Val felt a hand clutch one of his ankles as it swung in mid-air, and an Irish voice said exultantly:—

"Oi've got ye, me bye. Oi've got ye, ye spalpeen."

Val gave a gasp. It was Mike, whose existence he had momentarily forgotten. Like a flash he understood why the Major had wished to parley. It was to give Mike time to reach the tree before he could escape.

"Hang to him, Mike," commanded the Major, catching the sound of the Irishman's voice. "If he tries to get away, knock him on the head."

From the Major's standpoint this was doubtless good advice; but advice was not Mike's greatest necessity. It was a trying moment for the skipper of the "Spitfire," but he made the best of it. Instantly he raised his free foot, as he sat on the branch, and brought it forcefully down upon the Irishman's head, dimly visible below.

Mike dodged, but too late. The foot struck him fair on the top of his cranium, and elicited a resounding howl.

"Murther! Murther! Oi'm kilt; Oi'm kilt!"

He let go of Val's ankle, and that person improved his opportunity by clambering up into the tree, where, having attained a safe height, he awaited further developments. His way of escape had suddenly closed, and his heart sank as he realized the increased peril of his position. When daylight came, if it found him still in the tree, he could be forced to surrender at the Major's pleasure.

And now Bangs, finding that for some reason affairs were not going altogether to his liking outside, but not fully understanding the status of the case, emerged from the window to the roof.

"What's the matter, Mike? Have you got him?" he asked, walking cautiously down the wet shingles. "Hang on to him like a leech."

"Shure, an' the spalpeen's wint up the tree," responded the Irishman, rubbing his head; "an' may the ould Nick fly away wid 'im!"

"Went *up* the tree?" asked Bangs, pausing to gaze into the obscurity above him. "Then we're all right; we'll have him out of there by morning, sure's a ——"

His jubilant sentences were unexpectedly interrupted by a warning crack-crack-crack of the roof timbers on which he stood.

Then decayed shingles and rotten beams gave way beneath his weight. In another instant he sank from sight, vainly grasping in his fall at the crumbling edges of the orifice. Mr. Mecorrigan, who was

nursing a rapidly rising bump on his cranium, uttered a loud exclamation of dismay at his employer's mishap.

But Val, half seeing, half guessing, what had occurred, was so amused and elated by his enemy's plight that he nearly slipped from the limb whereon he sat. With Bangs in limbo and Mike's attention thereby diverted, he saw a chance of escaping. He began to descend with the same celerity that had marked his ascent.

But now another personage put in an appearance.

"Halloo!" called a voice from the edge of the grove. "Halloo, there! What's all this row about?"

It was the deck hand.

CHAPTER XX

VAL LEAVES HIS PERCH

WHEN a heavy man breaks through a rotten roof, and bruised and disheveled, falls a dozen odd feet upon a hard floor, the event is apt to take his mind off all his other troubles.

So with Major Bangs. Very soon after striking bottom he found his voice, and called lustily for Mike. That person, distracted by the necessity of obeying the summons, and at the same time of keeping Val safely treed, solved the problem by calling on Fenderson to stand guard, not being aware, in his excitement, that his prisoner had descended from his perch, and was making his way back to the roof.

"Come 'ere, you," he called, in response to the deck hand's query.

"What's the matter, Irish?" asked Fenderson, approaching. "What you browsin' round out here for?"

Mr. Mecorrigan hastily explained that Brandon was up the tree and must be kept from escaping; while the leader of the enterprise had met with an unfortunate accident and must receive prompt attention.

"I'd know that by his howlin'," retorted Fender-

son, irreverently, for Bangs was by no means keeping silent.

"Shtand guar-rd by the three," commanded Mike, "an' kape the young divil up thayre."

"An' thot I will," mimicked the deck hand, as the Irishman hastened to the Major's relief. "Soak the arnica to his nibs, me bye."

Meantime, his movements unnoticed in the gloom and excitement, Val regained the roof, and avoiding the hole where Bangs had been shipwrecked, reentered the window through which so recently he had made his exit.

Again within the house, he paused to consider his next move. Was he any better off there than in the tree? His present location had one advantage — he alone knew of it; but he could not rest here. At daybreak his absence from the tree would be discovered, and the house probably ransacked from top to bottom. Furthermore, now that Val had, in a way, thrown his pursuers off the scent, he desired to conduct his movements in secrecy, and, if possible, leave the house unnoticed; for, being almost totally unacquainted with the topography of the island, it would be a difficult thing to find a suitable place of refuge unless free from pursuit.

His hope had been to return to the boat, and leave the island altogether; but putting two and two together, he figured that the deck hand's failure to arrive with the Major meant he had been searching for the tender; having found which he would of

course so secure it — or at least hide the oars and oar-locks — as to make it useless to the young skipper.

So in something of a quandary he crept through the hall.

"Why not climb down the ladder and skip out the front door?" he queried, noting that the ladder was still in position. But Mike thwarted this plan by suddenly appearing in the lower hall. One hand carried the lantern; the other half supported Bangs, who staggered along tipsily, groaning at every step.

Val wasted no sympathy on this scene. He felt that Bangs deserved every bruise he had received, and so thinking, passed into the room adjoining. In his previous passage through this apartment, Val had noticed an old bedstead in a corner, but he had not seen what he now espied in the ceiling, — an opening, the counterpart of the one at his feet.

A wild plan of hiding in the garret, to make descents upon the lower regions when food was needed, flashed through his mind. Though instantly dismissed as impracticable, yet it seemed a good move to put another floor between himself and his enemies, and he proceeded to do so.

As Mike had escorted Bangs into a room on the other side of the house, Brandon used less caution about his movements. Tipping the bedstead on edge, he carried it on his shoulder to a position beneath the hole in the ceiling, and across the one in the floor.

Cautiously he climbed upon the bedstead until

he could reach the cover on the scuttle overhead; slid that noiselessly back, and essayed to draw himself up.

Up he went, indeed, but the bedstead, unsteady at best, tottered under the shock of his light jump, and came down, legs in the air, with a crash that awoke every echo in the old house.

"I've queered things now, that's sure," he muttered in great disgust, as he drew himself up into the garret and listened intently for his enemies.

But Bangs was perhaps too busy with his bruises and Mike too fully engaged with Bangs to pay attention to the noise. At any rate, no one appeared, so presently Val replaced the cover on the hole, and peered about.

The garret was open from side to side and end to end. At either end was a window, and overhead a skylight. But realizing now how extremely weary he was, Val only inspected the garret sufficiently to assure himself there was no means of entrance save that by which he had come.

Coming across a lot of empty boxes, he piled them up on the scuttle so they would topple over and alarm him if the cover was disturbed. Then down on the floor he lay, and fell soundly asleep in a moment.

Slumber of several hours' duration was ended by a stream of sunlight, which, entering an end window, fell upon Brandon's face and woke him. Much refreshed in body and mind, though a trifle stiff from

sleeping on boards, he rose at once, realizing that again he must be on the alert.

Another sensation also assailed him — that of an empty stomach, the prospect of filling which seemed most dimly remote.

And now daylight enabled Val to obtain an excellent idea of his surroundings. The garret was a huge one, and on either side the roof sloped to the floor. Little could be seen from the end windows or the skylight save the tops of the trees in the grove; but at the southeast corner — reckoning direction by the position of the sun — the garret opened into what he previously supposed to be a closet, but now found to be a part of the tower. Here was no window, but the dim light showed a ladder nailed against the wall, terminating above at a little door in the ceiling. Climbing up, Val swung up this door, and climbed out on the deck of the tower.

An exclamation of surprise left his lips, as he caught the beauty of the scene before him. He was high enough above the treetops to command a view of the entire island as it lay wrapped in light mist under the early sun. Rather oval in shape, it was perhaps a mile and a half long from north to south, and three quarters of that distance across from east to west.

The eastern shore appeared to be extremely rocky; at one point to the northeast quite a pinnacle of stone reared itself upon the ocean's edge. The

southwestern shore showed a strip of white beach; but Val's interest centered more especially in the crescent-shaped bay to the northwest, which cut deeply in toward the island's center. Here he had come ashore. The head of this bay was a narrow beach, backed by a high bluff, as he had previously found. The mouth of the harbor curved out of sight behind the high wooded headland to the left. The north shore was formed by a long curved strip of land, covered with sand and bushes, its shape suggesting a finger crooked, half shut.

Beyond this strip the "Sea Rover" lazily rose and fell, apparently just where she had first anchored; but as she was fully a mile distant, Val could not tell if any one was astir on board, nor could he see whether or not the tender was on the beach.

The whole island appeared to be an almost worthless agglomeration of sand and rocks, which patches of bushes and stretches of waving beach grass made attempts at concealing. Save for the grove about the house, and the wooded promontory near the harbor mouth, there was scarce a full-grown tree upon it.

Having completed his inspection, Val sat down, and leaning back against the parapet that topped the tower, resolutely faced the situation.

He found himself practically a prisoner, but worse off, in that he had nothing to eat and was wofully hungry. Mike had spoken truthfully when he said no one else lived on the island; and

Bangs controlled the food supply. It forced itself home to Val that liberty with nothing to eat was rather a poor article after all.

"If something doesn't turn up before night I shall have to surrender," he admitted finally, "for I haven't the least desire to go home a ghost."

Rising presently, he took a last exhaustive stare around. Imprudently leaning over the edge of the parapet, he caught sight of Mike staring up at him.

Val drew back, but too late. Mike had seen him, and instantly rushed into the house to give the alarm.

"Again the fight is on," muttered Val, as he hurried down the ladder, intending to make at the garret scuttle the battle he felt must now come. "Hang my beastly carelessness!"

As he alighted from the ladder, his toe caught in something metallic on the floor. He stooped and found an iron ring bolted to the planking.

As his eyes became accustomed to the dusk of the tower room, they made out a square in the flooring.

"This is worth following up," he thought. "It looks very much like a trap-door."

A mighty tug at the ring made the door buckle, but it did not open. The tower floor above had leaked, and the trap-door was swollen.

Sounds on the floor below now indicated the approach of his foes.

"He musht have wint up here," Mike's voice

said. Then came a shoving of boards out in the main garret, and Val's box pile toppled with a crash.

"Now the ladder, quick," came in Bangs' familiar tones. "What's this bedstead bottom-side up here for? He must have climbed up on it; but how he ever left the tree beats me."

Brandon tugged at the trap with fierce energy. After infinite effort it yielded, revealing darkness beneath, broken by rays of light that crept in here and there through cracks and chinks.

Haste was all-important. If no escape offered here, Val must be on the offensive at the scuttle, where sounds now indicated that the ladder was being set up.

To his joy, his groping hands found a ladder beneath the trap.

With a muttered exclamation of thankfulness the young skipper lowered himself into the darkness. As he pulled the trap-door shut above him, hasty footsteps sounded on the garret floor.

CHAPTER XXI

VAL OPENS A COMMISSARY DEPARTMENT

Down a rickety ladder a dozen feet long Val clambered, paying no attention to the footsteps above him, which indicated that Mike and the Major were searching for him.

He brought up on a landing, where he found nothing save rough walls, gloom, and a hole in the floor, through which a second ladder projected. Again he descended, and this time it was all of twenty-five feet before he reached a dirt bottom. Here the darkness was intense.

"This must be the cellar," Brandon mused, striking a light. But the match light showed nothing save a narrow passage leading off into darkness, and a bundle of sticks against the wall, which proved to be pitch-pine.

"Halloo, a torch!" he exclaimed in exultation. "This *is* luck, and I'll bet a cent this is the end of that old tunnel I fell into last night."

When he had a pitch knot flaring well, in good spirits for one so hungry — and with so poor a show, apparently, of getting a square meal — he started down the tunnel. This, he concluded, must lead straight to the water. Where else, in the nature

of things, could it lead? But to his dismay, a dozen paces farther brought him up against the end of the passage, a wall of rock.

Slowly he retraced his steps, peering high and low for some concealed way of exit. The roof, which was of planking, seemed in one spot to have a trap in it. Up went the torch against it, and his surmise proved true. The passage, which its builders had ended in a pocket, changed its level here for a higher one. The trap lifted with little effort, the torch was flung through, and Val, after a deal of scrambling, followed suit.

"That's a neat blind," he cogitated, as he shut the trap after him and looked about; for the upper passage extended fully twenty feet over and beyond the trap, where in turn it ended against a blank wall.

Resuming his journey, Val hurried onward. The walls of the passage were here and there of rock — here and there of planking, moldy and decaying. This led Val to believe that the basis of the tunnel was a natural rock passage, which had been supplemented as necessary by planking a way through the sand.

"At any rate, some one put in hard work on this tunnel," he thought, "and it must have taken a deal of time. I'd give my old shoes to know who built it, and the old house. It's the most like my idea of a pirate's retreat of anything I ever saw."

Which was undoubtedly true, since his eyes had

never beheld anything that in the least resembled his present surroundings.

Although Val had thus far succeeded in putting the best possible face on his unpleasant situation, yet it must not be thought that he did not feel considerable alarm, or, to say the least, anxiety, as to the probable outcome of his defiant attitude toward the Major.

Bangs was fond of using blustering language, but he could not help feeling there might be a grain of truth in the man's assertion that he, Val, would either starve to death or be shot at sight by one of the gang.

The more Val considered his situation, the more he became convinced that it was a highly unsatisfactory one, and as he moved along the uncanny subterranean passage, his spirits became more and more depressed. The present was uncertain, and the future seemed to offer little hope.

"I may be a fool for not accepting the Major's terms, after all," he admitted dejectedly. "But I made my choice," he continued, more determinedly, "and, like General Grant, I'll fight it out on this line if it takes all summer," for Val was not yet quite hungry enough to fully realize that a soldier cannot fight well on an empty stomach.

"Halloo!"

This exclamation was called forth by the abrupt widening of the passage into an apartment some

dozen feet square, and Brandon, standing in its center, gazed about him with wondering eyes.

"Here's the headquarters," he mused, gazing at the fireplace on the side, and the skylight overhead, through which no light now came because of the deep accumulation of sand on the upper side.

Opposite the fireplace was an ancient carved table, of a pattern such as Val had never seen before except in pictures, and upon it were strewn some pieces of wearing apparel, mildewed and moldy; garments cut in a style of long ago. But these were frayed and tattered — evidently cast away as useless by their original owner.

Inspection showed this cavern to be dug out of the sand, for it was timbered and planked on the sides and overhead; but the rough timbers were concealed — or had once been — by drapings of tapestry that hung in rotten rags from their fastenings, their once bright pattern now faded, and adding only to the dismalness of the place.

Lost in wonder, the young skipper inspected all these things — the ax, red with rust, that lay by the fireplace; the flint and steel, and tinder-box lying by a pile of wood on the hearth.

Everything spoke plainly of years of disuse; everything conjured up pirates bold, such as he had read of time and again, and their rakish-looking ships laden with treasure. And so powerfully did these surroundings act upon his mind, wrought up by the unexpectedness of his discovery, that when he espied

a box under the table, he rushed for it as though it might contain a fortune.

But it was too surprisingly light, though of metal, to contain much of a fortune, except in bank-notes — which Val was dimly aware were not in vogue when pirates were; and, opened after some effort, contained nothing except a roll of cloth.

But what a roll! Val drew it out, and as it unrolled from his hand, firm and untouched by mildew from its enclosure in the box, he beheld a black flag, made of fine silk, on which were embroidered in white a grinning death's head and cross bones.

"What a souvenir of this trip!" was Val's first ejaculation; and that brought to mind the nature of this trip, and the fact that his hunger was on the increase. His inspection came to a sudden termination. "For," he thought, "I can poke around here any time, but I want something to eat *now*."

He put the flag back in the box, and left the room by the passage, which led out at the opposite side from which it entered the cave. Nor had he gone more than a dozen yards when the passage divided into two, and sent a branch off to the right. Disregarding this and following what appeared to be the main tunnel, a few steps brought him to familiar ground. Here were his footprints in the sand; here the ladder against the wall; overhead the trap-door through which he had fallen. The passage now pitched steeply downward, and at the end of a hundred feet brought up against a wooden wall,

or barricade, which completely closed the way. This was composed of a doorway of heavy planks, made to swing inward, fitted to a casing in the rock, and secured by a stout iron bar placed from side to side. To remove the bar was the work of a moment, and after vigorous tugging, the door consented to open, its rusty hinges creaking dolefully.

Val emerged, not upon the beach, as he expected, but into a low, rocky, sea-lit cave, some twenty feet in length. Over the sandy floor of this cavern, clear to the casing of the door, the harbor water was rippling in, while the roof shelved down as it approached the outside entrance till the exit was scarcely three feet in height above the surface of the water. Stripping off shoes and stockings, with rolled-up trousers Val started to wade to the entrance. The water, however, deepened more rapidly than he expected, and he found he would be obliged to swim by the time the opening was reached, unless he edged along a narrow ledge which followed one wall, perhaps a foot under water. This he did, and presently had the satisfaction of emerging from the cavern, where, still clinging to the rock, he looked about with considerable curiosity.

Behind him rose the rocky bluff forming the head of the crescent-shaped bay, twenty feet or more in height. Before him lay the bay, though he could not see it all, since its entrance was hidden by the wooded promontory to the left, while at the right

the finger-like strip of land shut off a view of open sea and the steam-yacht. The beach ended some hundred yards to his right, and it was evident that even at low tide the cave would not be wholly free of water, neither would it be easily approachable, except by boat.

The boat was not on the beach; but in its place was a life-raft, such as is often seen on steamers, formed of two hollow metal cylinders placed side by side, with a wooden platform between. Val knew at a glance that Bangs had come ashore on this.

With considerable caution he climbed up the ledges to the summit of the bluff, and crouched in the bushes while he surveyed the "Sea Rover."

No one was visible about her decks, but he did not look long at her, for suddenly a rowboat, containing two men, shot into sight around the headland from the harbor mouth, and came toward the beach.

Val wormed his way through the bushes to a point immediately above the beach, though sufficiently far from the path to be invisible to any chance passer, and waited for the boat. It came rapidly nearer, and was very evidently the "Sea Rover's" tender. It sat low in the water, as though heavily loaded, and Val could see boxes and packages in her bow. The figure in the stern proved to be Bruce; the oarsman was the deck hand.

The tide being high, the beach was but a narrow strip, so that when the boat grounded she was well

under the bluff, and scarcely thirty feet from Val's hiding-place.

Every spare inch of space in the boat was taken up with bags, boxes, and cans. Bangs was evidently getting provisions ashore, for the boxes bore such brands as "Canned Baked Beans," "Columbia River Salmon," "Star Brand Soups," "Fancy Biscuit," et cetera, while a ham or two on top of the pile fairly made the young skipper's mouth water.

As the tender grounded, the deck hand laid down the oars with an exclamation of relief, and both men jumped out. They then began unloading the boat's cargo, placing each piece as far from the water as was possible without climbing the bluff, until a very respectable pile of edibles grew up almost under Val's nose.

"How long do we stop in this forsaken hole?" demanded Fenderson, presently, as he tugged away at the boxes, "and what job is the boss putting up here, anyhow?"

Bruce shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"We'll stay as long as you want to, don't you worry," he replied.

"But are you going to leave this stuff here?" persisted the deck hand.

"Of course. What's to harm it?"

"Brandon might snatch it."

'You told me that Bangs had got him safe," rejoined Bruce.

"So he had. When I left just before daylight they had him solid. He kindly climbed a tree to get out of their way, and now he'll either climb down or else get blown higher." Fenderson laughed at what he seemed to consider a great witticism.

"No danger of his escaping them," rejoined Bruce. "Besides, Mike will be down after the stuff soon."

"And a sweet time may he have of it, lugging those boxes through the bushes — excuse *me*," grimaced the deck hand. "But when does the other fellow come ashore?"

"Sometime to-day, probably. But don't stand there all day chinning. There's more stuff to get ashore, wood to cut for the engines, oceans of work to do. Get a move on."

"Confounded shame we can't steam right in and save all this rowing," grumbled Fenderson as the boat shoved off, the cargo being unloaded.

They moved leisurely away down the harbor, leaving Val Brandon inspired with a new idea—the capture of the lately landed provisions!

Under the circumstances he considered himself justified in confiscating them; and, in fact, the more he thought of the matter, impatiently waiting for the men to leave, there seemed a chance for him to seriously embarrass Bangs, and possibly bring him to terms, by depriving him of his food supply.

Both this thought, and the fact that he was himself half famished, led him to act quickly. His plan

was to transfer the boxes and bags to the underground passage before the men returned with a second load. There were the provisions, and there was the raft, and no sooner had the boat disappeared behind the headland than Val was scrambling to the beach. Hurriedly he loaded boxes and other packages upon the life-raft, and working it along with the pair of oars with which it was provided, maneuvered it into the cave and landed his cargo in the mouth of the tunnel. It took two trips to complete the transfer, after which he returned the raft to its original position, to disarm suspicion; and with such celerity was the whole thing accomplished, that within twenty minutes after he began loading the raft, he was seated on a box in the mouth of the tunnel, ravenously devouring crackers, cheese, and slices of ham which he hacked off with his jack-knife.

"Take the goods the gods provide, and be thankful and ask no questions," he exclaimed in a satisfied tone, gazing about on his new acquisitions, while the empty feeling in his stomach rapidly disappeared. "I scored one on Bangs this time," and Val chuckled as he pictured the rascal's rage at the loss of his supplies.

"And I very much doubt if he can conceive where they have gone, though he will know who took them." Brandon's hiding-place was certainly a capital one, and if, as he had reason to suspect, it was unknown to Bangs' gang, he failed to see why

his whereabouts should not continue to be a huge mystery to his enemies.

His hunger being appeased by a liberal allowance of the provisions most easily come at, and the boat not yet being in sight down the harbor, Val proceeded to take an inventory of his capture.

There were two cases of tinned soups, a case of canned corned beef, and one of beef smoked, canned baked beans, salmon, sugar corn, bloaters, plain and fancy biscuit, three hams, and half a cheese.

"I hope Providence will kindly provide me with a can opener on her next visit," said Val, when the inspection was completed. "It will be handy with the canned goods. I also want her to furnish an oil stove, some kerosene to run it, a skillet, and a few other dishes. Then I'll undertake to board myself for a short time, Bangs or no Bangs."

Now that he had established a commissary department, and appeased his hunger, Val was in a very cheerful frame of mind, as well he might be. Being just hopeful enough to believe that Bruce and the deck hand, missing their first load, would ascribe its absence to the energetic work of Mike Mecorrigan, he waited impatiently for the tender to appear with a second load, which he intended to capture as he had the first. He peeped out every minute to reconnoiter, until the boat appeared around the headland.

"Everything's fish that comes to my net," was his gleeful assertion. "Now if they will only credit

Mike with having made an awful hustle and rushed those boxes right up to the house, I stand a show of another haul.

"Major, Major, stay away, please," and he waved a hand warningly in the supposed direction of Bangs and the Irishman, for their appearance on the scene would spoil all his plans.

From the entrance of the cave, without exposing himself Val obtained a view of the harbor and the beach where the previous landing had been made. He waited in considerable anxiety while the tender came leisurely up, and grounded in the old place.

The distance was too great to hear ordinary conversation, owing to the lap-lap of the ripples, but he heard an ejaculation from Fenderson as he jumped ashore.

"Great Jehosaphat! do you s'pose that Irishman has been blamed fool enough to lug all that stuff away in this little time?"

And there followed a short conversation in lower tones, a general inspection of the beach in both directions, so far as they could inspect it without walking, and much gazing up the bluff.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" finally ejaculated the deck hand, in a loud tone, "but it must be so; there ain't no other way. Who ever s'posed Mike was such a hustler?"

The unloading then began, and as box after box was put ashore, Val fairly hugged himself at the success of his plans.

Five minutes sufficed to make the transfer, and the boat again shoved off, and started back to the yacht. Val, however, did not move until it was out of sight, and it was well he did not, for Bruce and Fenderson occasionally eyed the shore intently, as though suspicion had found a lodging in their minds, and they wished to have it dispelled by the sight of Mike actually at work.

The moment the boat vanished Val was out of the cave. He worked with all possible celerity, for there was now every danger of being surprised by Mike or the Major ; and indeed he did not doubt that it was only his supposed presence somewhere in the house that kept them away.

He wasted no time, though he could have given a moment to dancing a jig when he had the satisfaction of putting a small oil stove and a large can of kerosene aboard the raft. There was a box, also, that gave forth a rattle as of tin dishes.

"That must be the skillet and the can opener," exclaimed the young skipper, exultantly. Twenty minutes saw the second boat load placed under cover. There was nothing left but to replace the raft on the beach, and he had nearly completed doing so, when a noise on shore thrilled him with alarm.

Glancing up at the bank, he beheld the Major just arriving at the edge of the bluff, and behind him Mike.

Val began rowing away from shore for dear life. A moment later the Major caught sight of the young

skipper, and a smile of actual relief and enjoyment passed over his face. He did not yet know that his provisions were missing.

"Ho, Brandon!" he shouted, raising his voice, though there was little need, since the raft was not more than fifty feet away. As Val continued rowing, and made no reply, the Major scrambled down the bank, accompanied by Mike, and walked to the water's edge, where he drew his revolver and threateningly ordered Val to stop rowing.

Not caring to risk his life in so foolhardy a manner, Brandon complied, and faced about.

"Well, what do you want now?" he asked.

The Major gave vent to a roar of laughter. Val was in a box, and he thought he could afford to play with him a little.

"You can't imagine how glad I am to see you again, my dear fellow," he said with great suavity. "I began to think you had gone forever, but a kind Providence has seen fit to restore you to us."

"I can assure you the pleasure is all yours," retorted Val, grimly.

"Don't say that," said the Major, deprecatingly. "You are a necessity of our existence. We don't seem to be able to live without you; yet you spurn all our advances."

"Now talk sense, Bangs," said Val, in a tone of vexation that seemed to give the Major great satisfaction. "What do you want, anyhow?"

"For one thing, I would like to know how you

flew out of the top of that tower without our seeing you."

"Easily enough," said Val, nonchalantly, for he had suddenly conceived a plan of escape, and did not mind parleying with Bangs so long as it did not give the mate a chance to take him in the rear — which he did not doubt the Major figured upon, should he himself fail to force the yachtsman ashore.

"Oh, no doubt of it. Great mysteries are often simple when explained; but now you have returned to us, we will let bygones be bygones."

"I have not returned," said Val, with spirit, "and don't intend to."

"Very forcefully put; but I propose to make you."

"We'll see about that," declared Brandon.

But Bangs' temper had changed. He was in no mood for trifling. His tones rang out sharply.

"Brandon, come ashore, or I'll fire!"

But Val was too quick for his enemy. Before Bangs could take aim the young skipper dropped into the water on the side of the raft farthest from the beach. With both hands clasped on one of the metal cylinders, and with the barest trifle of his face showing above water, and that not visible to Bangs, he struck out energetically with his feet to propel himself out of range. Slowly but certainly the cumbersome raft moved away from the shore, while the Major fired shot after shot at it. Val, knowing he was amply protected, chuckled as he swam.

CHAPTER XXII

A CHASE AND THE RESULT

MAJOR BANGS soon saw that he was merely wasting ammunition by firing at the raft, and he desisted. He showed no inclination, however, to enter the water and swim after Val, nor did he ask Mike to do so. His last card was still to be played, for, as Val suspected, he was depending on Bruce and Fenderson to capture the young yachtsman in case his own attempt was unsuccessful.

His efforts had plainly failed, for Val, swimming easily on his back, with the raft between himself and the beach, was slowly but surely increasing the distance between himself and his would-be captor.

He proposed to make use of the raft only till he was out of pistol-shot, and then to abandon it and strike out for the headland across the bay. This was possibly an eighth of a mile distant, and he believed he could reach it and lose himself in the woods before Mike or the Major could possibly traverse the upper end of the bay, with its rocks and tangled underbrush, and reach the same ground.

Had Bangs imagined he was to find Val at the harbor, he would undoubtedly have adopted different tactics; but the meeting had been much more

of a surprise to him than it had to Brandon. Without attempting to force a passage along the shore — and indeed for the present it was uncertain from Val's movements just where he intended to go — Bangs began shouting at the top of his voice.

"Ho, Bruce — Bruce!" he bellowed. "Come ashore."

For several minutes he kept up an incessant hallooing, assisted by Mike's lusty lungs, and paced nervously to and fro, eyeing first the raft and then as much as he could see of the lower end of the harbor and the "Sea Rover."

By this time Val had reached what he considered a safe distance, and, leaving the raft, struck out alone. Several minutes passed, during which he swam steadily and strongly toward the headland. Then Bangs caught sight of the tender entering the harbor, and redoubled his shouts, supplementing them by numerous gesticulations, meant to call attention to the captain of the "Spitfire." These had their intended effect, for the boat changed its course, and with accelerated movement bore down toward Val, or, rather, toward a point between him and the shore, to intercept him.

"Hurry, you lubbers, hurry," raged Bangs, as he excitedly mopped his red face. "Catch him at any cost."

The two in the boat may or may not have caught the words, but Bangs' meaning was unmistakable. They understood the work that was cut out for them,

and surged through the water at a pace much faster than Val's, although, since the tender was loaded with stuff for the house, and consequently low in the water, they rowed at considerable disadvantage.

But Val was a good swimmer, and encumbered only by shirt and trousers, made rapid headway. The tide, which had been at flood, had already begun to turn, and this aided him, while it retarded the tender. And so it fell out that in spite of the Major's exhortations, and the utmost exertions of the deck hand at the oars, Val reached the shore some distance ahead of the boat. With muscles and nerves stimulated to unnatural effort by the excitement of the moment, he climbed the high bank and vanished in the dense woods, untouched by a shot or two that Bruce sent after him.

The tender grounded presently, and the occupants leaped out. Chagrined by their failure to overtake the swimmer before he reached shore, they clambered up the bluff in hot pursuit. The Major, also, when he saw the outcome of the brief chase, at once made his way, accompanied by Mike, around the head of the bay. The shore was a tangle of bushes and underbrush, and high and jagged rocks, and the headland was separated from the rest of the island by a swampy ravine. So the Major and his Irish ally found the traveling anything but easy, and finally reached Val's retreat, muddy from their passage through the swamp, and dripping with perspiration.

The promontory might perhaps have covered a couple of acres, and every portion of it was wooded. Vines and briers ran riot amid the tree trunks, and to get about was no very easy task, to say nothing of hunting for a fugitive. If Val had looked for a month he could not have discovered a better place for concealment.

Nothing could be seen of Bruce and Fenderson, though some one was crashing about not far away, and the late comers plunged along in the direction of the noise.

"Keep a sharp lookout," Bangs admonished. "We must not let the scamp escape us this time."

"Be jabers, an' Oi think Oi know what Oi'm a-doin'," was the breathless response. "Do ye think Oi'm out for a pleashure thrip? Let me at 'im. Oi'll corrk him up so he'll bother us no more."

Two acres of ground do not make a large area, but to Bangs and his confederates that densely wooded promontory seemed to extend miles in every direction. To and fro, hither and thither, they went in anxious search; but when they had covered the whole ground, and met finally on the bluff overlooking the harbor, not a glimpse had any of them caught of the young skipper since the moment he disappeared.

We will not repeat the utterances of all four when they realized their hunt had been unsuccessful. There was violent upbraiding of Bruce by the Major, which the former heartily resented. Even Mike came in for a portion of the vials of Bangs'

wrath, being held responsible for Val's escape from the tree in the first place.

So, in an extremely uncomfortable state of mind all around, they returned to the spot where the boat had been left, and climbed down the bank — to find her gone!

Bangs was first to reach the shore, for, having vented his wrath on the others, he strode along ahead. His idea of the landing-place was but a general one; yet, not seeing the boat where he expected, he called to Bruce:—

"Where's the boat?"

"Right under your nose," that person responded in a most sour voice. Then he, too, saw that the tender was gone, and his tone changed to one of amazement.

"Well, I'll be blowed! Where *is* that boat?"

"Didn't you tie her up?"

"No, for I was first to land, and struck right into the woods."

"Fenderson," called the Major, excitedly, as the person addressed came into sight behind the mate. "Did you hitch the boat?"

"No, I pulled her up, and rushed up the bank after Brandon. Has she drifted off?"

"Well, you're as big a fool as they make 'em," wrathfully exclaimed the leader of the expedition. "Don't you know enough yet to hitch a boat?"

The four were now at the water's edge.

"You look here, Bangs," exclaimed the deck hand,

hotly. "You've carried this thing far enough. Call me a fool again and I'll punch your head. I've had enough of it. You can keep a civil tongue when you speak to me or I throw up the job, see?"

Bangs realized that his unreasoning temper had gotten the best of him. He changed his tones, but they were none the less anxious.

"Let it pass, Fenderson," he said, in an attempt at conciliation. "The actions of that confounded cub have completely upset me. Now our boat is gone, and only the old Nick knows what will happen next."

"Here's where we came ashore," said Bruce, carefully examining the sand. He pointed out the marks left by the bow of the tender.

"Do you find any tracks of bare feet?" asked Bangs, eagerly scanning the strand. "Brandon was barefooted." The shore here was but a narrow strip as at other points on the harbor, and the tide had already receded somewhat. There were, however, no footprints save those made by members of their own party.

"She was not hauled up far enough, and the tide drifted her off," Bangs decided shortly. He held his temper under, however, and made no remarks that might hurt the deck hand's feelings. He knew too well the results of an insurrection in his own party.

"When you and Fenderson got out, you probably gave her a backward push in jumping ashore," he

continued, addressing the mate. "In your excitement you forgot all about the boat, and that's the whole of it.

"Now we must keep along the shore around the head, and see if we can't find her," he directed. "She will be drifting toward the mouth of the harbor. We can't afford to lose the only boat we've got."

"True," corroborated the mate, as the party started along the beach in the direction proposed by Bangs, "and she's loaded with a lot of truck we don't want to part with."

As intimated, there was no sign of the boat in the upper harbor. To gain a view of the lower bay and the entrance, it was necessary to follow the convex curve of the promontory shore around a point a short distance away, which, despite their weariness, they did with considerable alacrity.

The turn reached, their eyes became fixed on an object leisurely drifting seaward some hundreds of feet distant, and equidistant from both sides of the bay. It was the tender.

"There she is," was Bangs' relieved exclamation, "though we'll have to swim for her. However, we'll walk to the mouth of the bay, and catch her where it's narrower."

"Unless I'm greatly mistaken, we won't catch her there, if we do at all," suddenly declared the deck hand, as he stripped off his coat and hurried into the water. "Look across. Do you see any one?"

Looking in the direction indicated, his companions saw Val Brandon in the act of plunging in to swim out to the boat. The sight set the Major's nerves a-tingle.

"Swim for it, Fenderson, swim for it," he urged. And the deck hand swam as best he could, hand over hand, though in his haste he had neglected to throw off his shoes, and was greatly hampered by them.

"By the great horn spoon!" said the mate, in an agitated voice. "If Brandon gets there first, he'll have things all his own way.

"I tell you, Bangs," he continued, turning to the much perturbed man at his side, "for downright, unadulterated excitement your island racket takes the palm."

"What's in the tender?" Bangs asked, shuffling about like an excited boy.

"There's a rifle, and two shotguns, most of our ammunition, and a few other things. Oh, he won't be able to do a thing to us when he gets hold of them.

"Yes, hurry him up," he added, for the Major had begun to shout encouragement to the deck hand, who had covered half the distance.

But Val's head was bobbing steadily along from the other direction, and being unhampered by shoes, he appeared to have a decided advantage over Fenderson in point of speed.

When he hurried into the woods on the headland, he knew his action would draw, not only the occupants of the boat, but probably Bangs and Mike as

well, to that vicinity. With a fair start of his pursuers, he crossed the woods—despite his bare feet, which came in for a severe bruising — a thing he believed his enemies would not expect him to do, as most certainly they did not; and, reaching the water at the entrance to the harbor, he swam across the narrow passage to the opposite shore.

He was now at the extremity of the finger-like promontory that formed the northwest shore of the bay, which, while undoubtedly underlaid by ledges, since it withstood the beating of the wind and waves, seemed but a strip of sand, covered here and there with clumps of beach grass and heaps of driftwood. Thoroughly exhausted with his exertions, and feeling safe for the present, Val lay down in a patch of grass, and rested.

Across the channel, even above the noise of the surf on the outer shore — for a westerly wind was rising, and kicking up a swell — he could hear occasional shouts, and he chuckled grimly at thought of the Major and his companions beating the woods for him.

"And now," he meditated, turning to take a look at the yacht, "if I only had a boat I'd row out to the 'Sea Rover' and call on Cal."

His curiosity was excited by a column of smoke rising from the yacht's stack, and a half-formed plan of swimming out was instantly dismissed as impracticable. The engineer had evidently recovered his usefulness.

After a thorough rest, Val presently crept down to the bay shore, to see what his pursuers were doing. No sooner had he sighted the water, than he saw the tender drifting down the bay.

"Jinks!" he exclaimed in delight, "they didn't hitch the boat, and she's drifted off. What's to hinder my capturing her?"

He could see no reason why he should not seize the boat — an act which would give him an advantage over his enemies. But they were not in sight, and the boat was still some distance off. It would be well to let the tide bring her nearer; so he sat down and kept a sharp watch.

Perhaps five minutes had passed when Bangs, Bruce, Mike, and the deck hand came into view on the opposite shore. Val arose at once and plunged into the water. Not doubting that some one of the other party would do the same thing, he proposed to have a start. He had the ebbing tide to contend against, which was one thing in favor of the deck hand; yet the current that hindered Brandon was at the same time drifting the boat nearer to him and away from Fenderson.

"Be the bloody blazes!" Mike exclaimed, as he climbed the bank for a better view of the race. "The spalpeen's gainin', he's gainin' on 'im."

"Talk English, can't you?" cried Bangs. "Who's ahead? I can't see Brandon now."

A moment later the young skipper reached the boat, and pulled himself up into sight.

"Look," said Mike, despondently. "Do ye see him now?"

Thereupon the Major swore roundly.

"Betther shtop yez cussin' an' git out yez common sinse," wisely counseled the Irishman. "The bye's on top the hape."

"You talk as though you were glad of it," indignantly retorted the Major.

"Begorra, an' it takes the load off me moind to have matthers sittled any way at all, so it does."

"I reckon we're pretty close to being settled," exclaimed the mate. "What did I tell you?"

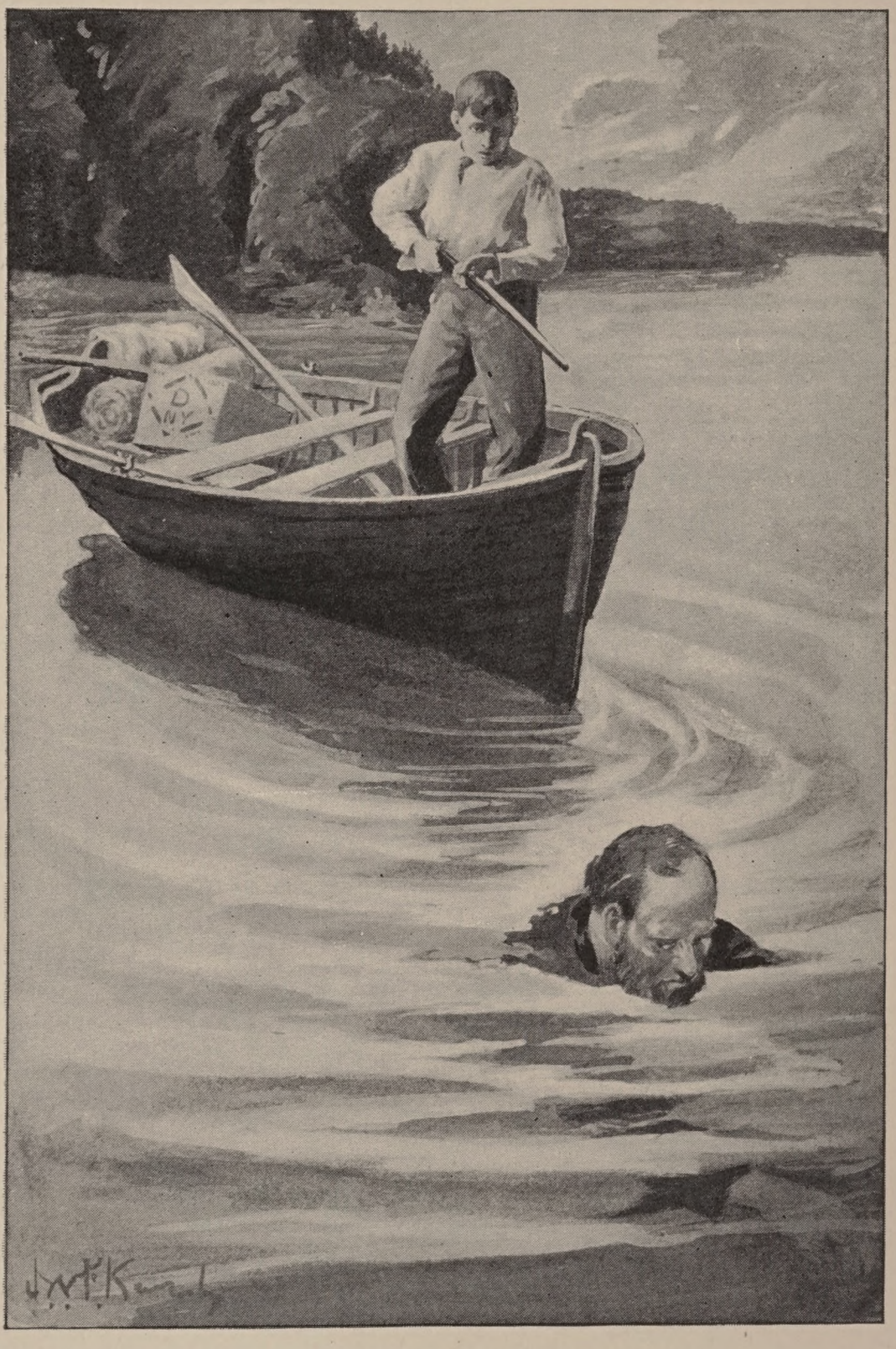
Val had taken possession of the boat and its contents. The firearms were in plain sight, and he at once picked up the rifle. It was a repeater, with a shell in place and a full magazine.

Fenderson was still approaching.

"Go back," warned Val. And the deck hand, seeing no other way, turned and swam back to shore.

"If it kills us all, we've got to keep that boy on this island," announced Bangs, forcefully, as he witnessed the outcome of the swimming contest.

"Bruce, go down to the mouth of the bay, and if Brandon tries to row out, don't let him pass alive. Your revolver will cover the passage. The rest of us will see what we can do elsewhere."



"'GO BACK,' WARNED VAL."

CHAPTER XXIII

FORCING THE ISSUE

By this time the sun was pretty hot, and Val Brandon was tired after his swimming match; so he let the boat drift while he recovered his breath and inspected the cargo.

There was bedding — blankets and pillows taken from the "Sea Rover's" bunks. There were the firearms mentioned by Bruce, and plenty of ammunition; and, as he examined this, Val felt that if ever he gained any control over affairs on the island, it would be through this small arsenal.

"Any eatables, I wonder?" he mused, feeling about under the blankets. His search brought to light a tub of butter, a case of eggs, several fishing lines, boxes of cigars, matches, a hammer, and other sundries. There was also a parcel containing novels; recent editions with uncut leaves. Bangs had not proposed to spend his island vacation without mental recreation.

"I gather them in, yes, one by one," soliloquized Val, gleefully, wondering how the Major would feel when he found his choice cigars were beyond his reach.

The inspection finished, Val gave his attention

to the movements of Bangs and his confederates. The Major and his two companions had disappeared in the underbrush; Bruce had reached the harbor mouth, and taken a position on the shore. His purpose was not hard to guess, and as the tide was steadily carrying the boat nearer and nearer, Val seized the oars and rowed farther up the harbor.

He was still rowing when a loud halloo came from the head of the bay, and turning, Val saw Bangs, Mike, and Fenderson on the beach where the provisions had been landed. The Major was waving a white cloth aloft, and beckoning.

"That must be intended for a flag of truce," was Val's conclusion. "The old rascal wants to know where his provisions are, I'll bet a cent. Let him sweat awhile; I've perspired considerably on his account to-day."

He ceased rowing and lay lazily back on the blankets, watching Bangs wave the white cloth, and listening unmoved to his loud invitations to row up nearer.

Finding that Val did not respond in the slightest to his invitations, the Major presently came along the beach until he was directly abreast the tender, and only a matter of a few hundred feet distant. The Irishman and the deck hand followed, but not so hurriedly. They might have been tired of man-hunting on so warm a day.

"Come over here," called Bangs, still waving the cloth, — a handkerchief. "I won't touch you."

"What do you want?" asked Val, after pondering upon the advisability of rowing nearer shore.

"I want to talk with you."

"We have talked enough already," was Val's response. "I'm going to stop talking, and do something."

"Come over," coaxed the Major. "Perhaps we can make a bargain."

"I'll not trust you," said Val, shortly, though his curiosity was aroused as to what Bangs might have to say regarding the disappearance of the provisions. He certainly must have been informed of their disappearance by this time, and had probably waxed wrathy over the fact.

"You needn't come ashore," went on the Major. "Row near enough so we won't have to shout."

"*I* don't *have* to shout," responded Val, serenely. He was not soliciting the interview. However, he sculled the boat a little nearer shore, and with the rifle in plain view over his knee, sat down and waited for the Major to open the conversation.

"What do you intend to do?" Bangs demanded, coming at once to the point.

"You'll see when the time comes," replied Val, evasively. He kept a sharp lookout on all three as he talked, for he did not propose to have any one getting the drop on him. The rifle would carry much farther than any firearm the Major or his men possessed, and this knowledge made him feel he held the advantage so long as he did not get too near

shore. But it would not do to be careless; the Major only waited to take him at a disadvantage.

"I'll tell you now that you are about at the end of your rope," blustered the Major. "What have you done with our provisions?" he went on. "You will rue it if you don't give them up. Where are they?"

"That's for me to know, and for you to find out — if you can," Val retorted, teasingly. There was no use trying to conceal the fact he had taken them.

The Major shuffled about excitedly for a moment. Then, with an attempt at self-control, said: —

"We want that boat."

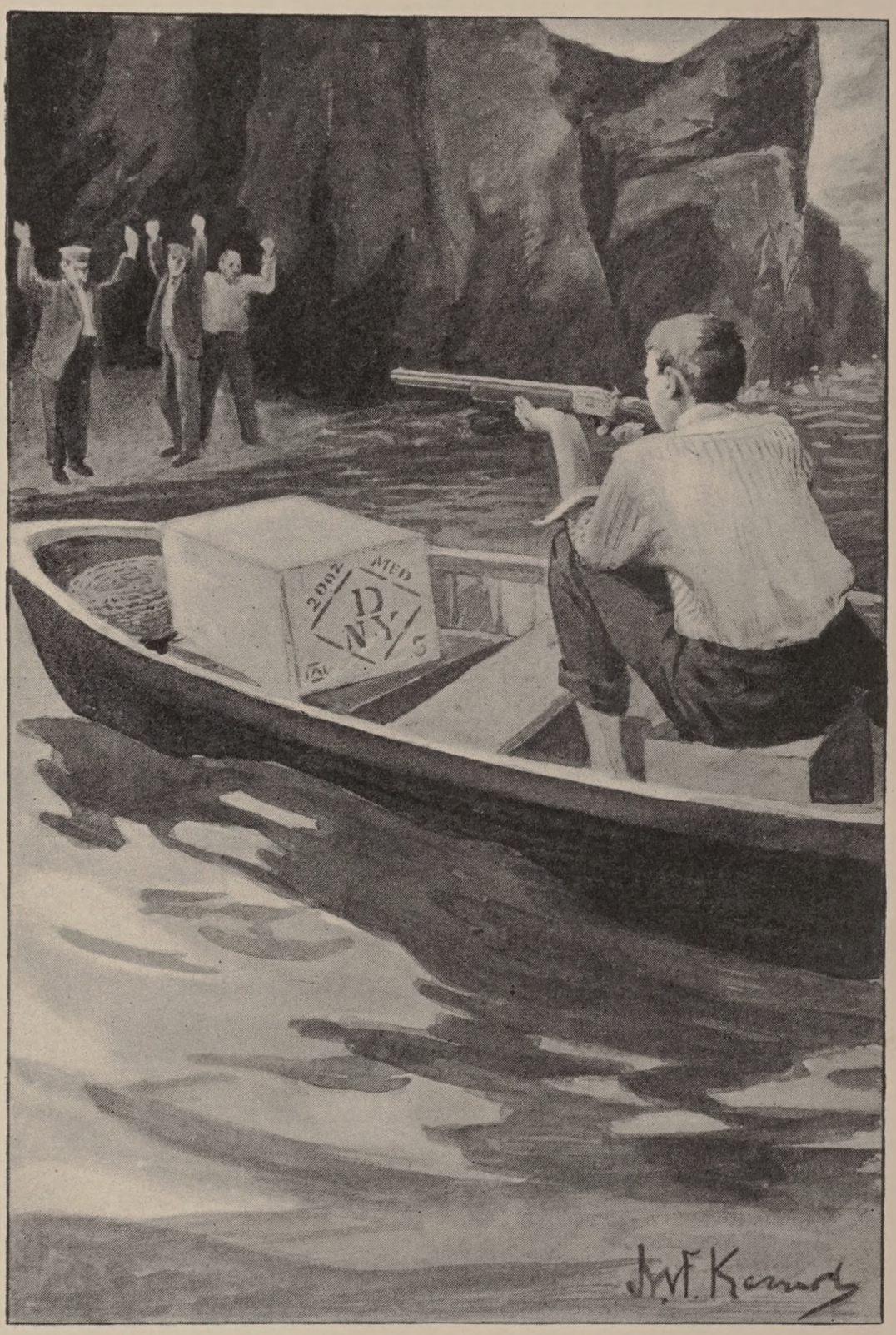
"I suppose you do."

"Yes, and we are going to have it."

"You really surprise me," exclaimed Val, sarcastically.

"If you don't come ashore, give up the boat and the provisions, and submit to us, we'll snake you out of the water inside of an hour, mark my words. We are desperate men; we won't trifle with you a moment longer. You have interfered with our plans at every turn. If you don't come to terms we'll have no compunctions about shooting you. Once more I ask you, will you come to terms?"

"No. I'll wait till it comes on to *blow*," rejoined the young skipper, in a jocular tone. "Go on, Major. Let her go! Whoop her up! I'm really anxious to see what you propose doing."



"'NOW, UP WITH YOUR HANDS,' COMMANDED VAL."

Val felt as though he was ready for almost anything now, and did not hesitate to chaff the burly rascal to the top of his bent. But he hardly expected what followed. Bangs, exasperated by the coolness of the young fellow in the boat, made a sudden reach for his revolver; but he was too slow.

Val was several seconds ahead of him in raising his rifle and covering his enemy.

"Drop it! Drop it, I say!"

With an execration Bangs threw the pistol on the sand. He had not looked for this.

"Now, up with your hands," commanded Val, sternly. "Up; up higher. Put them up, I say. There, that'll do very well."

Bangs had his arms stretched up to their farthest extent. Upon this unexpected scene Mike and the deck hand gazed in astonishment, not unmixed with fear. It was apparent they were unarmed, for they made no offer to assist their chief.

"Now, Major, talk up. I want to ask you some questions," asseverated Brandon, with provoking assurance, "and I shall expect you to answer them."

The Major uttered an exclamation that sweepingly consigned Val and his questions to a warmer climate; and with a side glance at his companions, beckoned them to approach.

"That's right," commented Val. "Come along up, you two. I've just appointed myself Disclosure Commissioner for Tower Island. The Major will

now reveal some interesting things; come up and hear them. It will be safer, too, to have you in range."

Thus admonished, and with as much curiosity regarding the outcome of this novel situation as surprise at its occurrence, they stepped to the side of their chief.

"Put up your hands," ordered Val.

"Shure, an' we've no shootin' oirons," protested Mike, well knowing it would be no fun to hold his hands up for an indefinite period.

"That makes no difference," replied Val. "Put them up; up higher, both of you. There," he went on, as the three men stood with arms aloft, and gazed uneasily at the muzzle of the rifle, "aren't you a nice lot of birds? 'Twould do me good to blow the lot of you right off the beach.

"Now, Major, tell me how long did you propose to stay on this island?" asked Val.

"None of your business."

"Major, how long did you propose to stay on this island?" repeated Brandon. "If you don't answer in three seconds I shall shoot. One — two — three." Bang!

Val pulled the trigger, and the rifle spoke. He purposely fired over the heads of the trio, but they did not know that fact. Mike fell down in fright; the Major and Fenderson dodged. Val threw out the empty shell and shifted a loaded one into position before they recovered from their consternation.

Evidently Bangs had not believed Val would shoot, or he might have shown more discretion and less temper.

"Stand up," commanded the young skipper, with an ironical laugh. "Hands up again; up — up higher. There; now aren't you a brave lot?"

Bangs scowled sourly, Mike looked frightened, while the deck hand smiled in a sickly manner; but every one did as he was bid.

"Major, how long did you propose to stay on this island?" asked Val for the third time.

"A month, or longer, perhaps," said Bangs, with great reluctance, speaking as though the words were pulled out by main force. He was greatly exasperated at the situation in which he found himself, though he could not bring himself to believe it would last long.

"What do you mean by 'or longer perhaps'?" demanded his interrogator, relentlessly.

"That I don't know."

"Right," agreed Val, cheerfully. "*You* don't know; but *I* do."

"I suppose so," sneered Bangs. "One would almost think you knew everything, and were doing everything, just now. My turn will come."

"We'll not cross that bridge till we reach it. I say you are going to leave this island to-day," declared the young skipper, boldly.

The Major gave a contemptuous sniff, though his feet shifted nervously. There was no knowing

what this young tartar of a yachtsman might take it into his head to attempt; the very thought made him feel uncomfortable.

No such thoughts perplexed Mike.

"Listen to the chake of 'im," he exclaimed in amazement.

"Keep quiet, Mike," commanded Val, abruptly. "Put your hands up higher — higher yet."

"Begobs, an' me hands are a-pullin' me arrums off alridy," the Irishman grumbled, yet obeying perforce, for he liked the looks of the rifle muzzle even less than the others.

"Where is my chum, Carroll Morse?" calmly proceeded Val. "Is he on shore or aboard the yacht?"

"On the 'Sea Rover,'" growled Bangs, looking in the direction of the steamer.

"Face toward me," Val commanded sternly, without glancing around.

Bangs leisurely obeyed, but a curious smile flickered over his face as he did so.

"And now," went on the young skipper, determinedly, "I want you to tell me where you think my yacht is, and what in your opinion has become of my other chum, Parker."

"I don't know where your yacht is," said Bangs. "I'd give more to know," he continued with some energy, "than you would."

"You said she would be left safe at Pod Island, but that was a lie, for I saw her drive past the yacht

when we were waiting, and the squall struck. Why did she leave her anchorage?"

"We sent a man to bring Parker to the yacht. The fact that the yacht went past in the squall shows that he tried to sail out with him. We followed, and tried to overtake him; but what could we do in that tempest? You know the rest. What's the use of talking? Either they're dead or they're not."

"God grant they are not," muttered Brandon, earnestly.

The big villain uttered a heartless laugh.

"Begorra, an' me arrums are bushted entoirely," moaned Mike at this juncture.

"You can take them down, both you and Fenderson; but do not dare to move away," said Brandon.

"How about me?" asked the Major, weariness showing in his face. "There's no sense in my holding my hands up, anyhow. I'm going to take them down." And he started to suit the action to the word, but Brandon interposed.

"Stop, Major. Put them up — up higher. I'm not through with you yet."

"Well," exclaimed Bangs, with an air of resignation, "what do you want now?"

"There are many things I would ask if I thought you would tell the truth about them, as, for instance, why you came to this island. But tell me, have you kept your agreement with Carroll Morse?"

The Major hesitated. If he admitted that the agreement made with Cal had been canceled, might

he not lose all chance of making a similar one with Brandon?

"Yes," he finally asseverated.

"Then why isn't he on shore and at liberty?"

"I'm not ready for him to come ashore yet."

"If he is at liberty on the yacht, why have I seen nothing of him on her deck? I have watched closely from time to time all the morning, and haven't seen a sign of him."

"That's not my fault," growled the Major. "Do you expect me to set him up on deck for you to gaze at?"

"No, sir; no more than I expect you to tell the truth. I do not believe you. You have broken faith with my chum; and yet expect me to believe you will keep an agreement with me. You have run this expedition long enough. I propose to manage it now."

Bangs sneered, but made no reply.

"Now, Mike," went on Val, "I want you to pick up that revolver and toss it out here to me."

The Irishman moved forward in obedience to the command; but paused as Bangs muttered something Val could not hear.

"Lively, now!" admonished Brandon. "Throw it here."

Mike picked up the weapon, and was about to carry out Val's instructions, when Bangs interposed.

"You shall not!" he exclaimed vehemently.

"Allow me to say I am bossing this job," said the young skipper, tartly. "Go on, Mike."

The Irishman finally gave the revolver a toss; but it did not reach the boat by a dozen feet. Val had expected this, but did not care so long as it diminished by one the number of firearms in the hands of his enemies.

While this was being done, the Major had stolen another glance in the direction of the "Sea Rover," and another grim smile flickered over his face.

"What makes you think we will leave the island to-day?" he demanded with sudden interest.

"Because I shall compel you."

"I guess not."

"I won't argue with you. I know what I'm about."

"How'll you do it?" asked the deck hand, incredulously.

"Wait and see," was the short response. "Mike."

The Irishman looked up in some anxiety.

"Yis, sor."

"I want you to go aboard the 'Sea Rover' at once, and bring back Carroll Morse."

"Not much he will," Bangs exclaimed with another peculiar smile.

"Keep still, if you please, Major. Mike, you will take this boat and row to the yacht. Get Carroll Morse and bring him ashore at once. I shall hold Major Bangs and Fenderson as hostages for your prompt obedience to orders. If you try any funny business, they suffer. Understand?"

Mike looked confused.

"I say no!" shouted Bangs, vehemently.

"Keep your mouth shut, Bangs. I'm talking."

"You won't talk much longer, I'll allow," retorted the chief of the expedition, with a glance down the bay.

This glance made Val turn for a moment also, and the sight he saw was a most unwelcome one.

The "Sea Rover," with a cloud of smoke belching from her stack, was under way, and just entering the harbor. Whether the engineer was disabled or not, her engines were running, and her presence in the harbor would upset Val's plans completely.

"Who's running her?" asked Val, half involuntarily.

"Don't you wish you knew?" jeered Bangs. "Better come ashore, my young rooster, before it *comes on to blow*."

It was a puzzling moment for the young skipper.

Meanwhile the yacht came steadily onward, heading directly for the rowboat. Val saw that if he would keep his liberty he must act, and act at once.

CHAPTER XXIV

CAL DISCOVERS THE SECRET OF THE EXPEDITION

After all, it was the Major's crowd who had forced the issue, not Percival Brandon.

When Val saw the yacht bearing down upon him, he laid down the rifle and began rowing energetically toward the cave, paying no attention to Bangs, who began to threaten.

Brandon was surprised, too, at what seemed the recklessness of those in charge of the "Rover" in attempting to enter the bay on a falling tide. He quickly decided, however, that they were acquainted with the characteristics of the harbor, for the steamer moved at a fair rate of speed, causing Val to ply his oars lustily. His rifle would give him no show with men fighting behind bulwarks.

He determined to row into the cave, and thus save the boat and its contents. It might be a reckless proceeding to thus reveal the entrance to his hiding-place; but he felt confident that, once inside himself, he could build a barricade that would keep out his enemies.

Bangs and his companions hurried along the beach abreast the tender, jeering at the oarsman. The Major seemed to think his turn had come. But

Val saved his breath for his work, and made no reply to the remarks of the party on shore. His eyes were fixed on the yacht, which was covering four feet to his one.

Second to his anxiety to keep out of the clutches of Bangs, was a deep curiosity to know who was at the steamer's wheel. He was not left long in doubt. The "Sea Rover" had closed up half the distance that intervened between the two craft at the start when a head was poked out of the wheel-house window, and the mate's voice hailed him threateningly.

"Bruce," muttered Val, in wonder. "How did he get aboard?"

The "Sea Rover" was now less than an eighth of a mile away. She was not running at full speed, for as she got up into the bay Bruce's bump of caution asserted itself. She was, however, moving much too rapidly to suit Val, who exerted himself at the oars until great drops of perspiration rolled off his face and trickled down his neck.

Bangs had paused some distance back. He mopped his red face with the late flag of truce, and watched the race with great enthusiasm.

"Let her go, Bruce," he shouted exultantly to the mate, as the yacht came abreast of him. "You've got him. By Jove, this is *our* innings."

And now the face of the mate took on a look of triumph, for he was nearing the tender at a rapid pace. He commanded Val in a loud tone to stop rowing.

His command was not obeyed, and his triumph was short-lived. A moment later the "Sea Rover" ran aground on a sand-bar with a shock that threatened to tear off her keel, and almost precipitated Bruce through the wheel-house window. And Val Brandon presently sent the tender out of sight into the cave, disappearing into what his baffled pursuers had hitherto considered a solid wall of rock.

Carroll Morse did not sleep much on the night the yacht reached Tower Island, for anxiety for his chum and himself made him exceedingly perturbed.

For some time after Val's escape Bangs kept things in a bustle on the yacht. Finally, after the rockets had been discharged, the Major and Fenderson left the yacht, and quiet once more settled down over those left behind.

After several hours of impatient waiting — for he had hoped that Val would soon return with assistance from shore to overpower the yacht's crew and release him — Cal turned in, and fell into a troubled sleep.

Early in the morning he was awakened by tramping feet, and the thumping of boxes on the deck. The cabin doors were locked, as he had ascertained with a little difficulty, for as his hands were handcuffed behind him, he was obliged to back up to the doors in order to manipulate the knobs; but through the windows he could gain a fair idea of what was

happening outside. Now began the transfer of provisions and bedding to the island, which Cal could see, for the tide, just beginning to ebb, swept around the island in such a way that the yacht swung broadside to the shore, thus enabling him to obtain a view from the windows.

He was an interested witness of the chase for Val Brandon, though he could get but a vague idea of it all, and the result was in uncertainty when he became aware that some one was stirring about forward. He heard the sound of coal being shoveled into the furnace, and presently footsteps sounded on the deck and a face peered in—a face streaked with blood from a wound on the temple, with disheveled hair sticking out from under a cap, and eyes that shone with feverish light.

It was Marshall, the engineer, who had recovered consciousness.

"Where are they all?" he cried.

"Ashore," was Cal's laconic response. The engineer went forward, and Cal saw no more of him; but the shoveling continued at intervals, and occasionally a wreath of smoke swept down past the window, indicating that Marshall was getting up steam.

What his purpose was in so doing is uncertain, for he had regained consciousness with a mind unbalanced by his accident; but Bruce, from his position at the harbor entrance, saw the smoke belching from the steamer's stack, and in an agony of apprehension lest Cal was trying to run off with the yacht,

stripped off his outer clothing and swam out, arriving just as steam was up.

Under his direction the yacht ran into the harbor, and gave chase after Val, with results as related.

When the yacht grounded, Bruce rang violently for the engineer to reverse; but that person was down in the stoke-hole, and did not at once respond. So it was some moments after the "Rover" struck before her propeller ceased forcing her ahead, during which time she wormed herself so deeply into the sand-bar that a reversal produced no effect whatever; and they were obliged, perforce, to wait for the next tide to lift her from her resting-place.

But long before that happened, Cal was taken ashore on the raft, and now we find him in a second-story room in the old mansion — the room into which Val had climbed to escape the Major's wrath, —with the handcuffs transferred from his wrists to his ankles, under the guardianship of Mr. Mecorrigan.

Mike nailed down the cover over the opening in the floor, put a fastening on the outside of the door, and would have secured the scuttle cover in the ceiling if he could have managed it; but concluded to let it go, since Cal could not possibly get far away with his ankles fettered; and, "Onyhow," as Mike sagely remarked, "he'll not be able to fly far wid mesilf here to clip his wings."

There was not much for Cal to inspect in this dilapidated abode. The windows afforded him a

view of little save trees, with glimpses here and there of rough land, covered with rocks and bushes. On one side of the room was a fireplace, and across a corner had been built a wall of brickwork, white-washed, that seemed to close up a doorway. This, Cal discovered, was formerly a passage leading into the tower, which stood at that corner of the house.

Dinner came now, and though not sumptuous, it was welcome, for owing to a scarcity of dishes, it was served on a pine board. But Cal was ravenous, and it disappeared quickly enough, even to the last drop of black coffee, served with neither milk or sugar, and Mike descended to the lower regions, locking his prisoner in.

How slowly the afternoon wore away. Along toward night Mike brought in a pair of blankets for his bed, and a box, which was evidently intended for both chair and table.

"Can't you give me a decent chair?" exclaimed Cal, with some asperity, as he saw what Mike was bringing in.

"Take what yez gets, an' be thankful," advised the Irishman, grumpily. "The Major's losin' no love on the likes of ye at presint."

"That's no fault of mine," declared Cal. "I didn't want to come on this excursion."

"I shpose not. No more did the other bye; an' begorra, he's cuttin' up to bate the piper."

"Do you mean Val Brandon?"

"Thot's what."

"What has he done besides getting away?"

"The wurrust of it is the spalpeen has stayed away," returned Mike, with a grimace. "An' he's took wid him two boat loads of grub, three guns, and plenty of the beddin' thot was to come ashore, an' the boat."

At this recital Cal opened his eyes in astonishment.

"Where has he gone?" he asked.

"Oh, he's not off the oiland — not yit; he wint into a shmall cave down on the edge of the wather, wid boat an' all, an' Oi'm a-tellin' yez it'll be the ould Nick's own job to get 'im out of thot same."

Cal laughed.

"Oh, yez can laugh," grumbled Mike, starting for the door as the tramp of feet sounded outside the house, "but yez wouldn't have laughed if yez had been shtood up on the wather's edge an' foired at, begobs."

"What do you mean?"

"Thot's what the spalpeen did ——"

"Where are you, Mike?" asked a voice below, and the Irishman vanished, locking the door after him, leaving Cal in a state of wonderment at the audacious campaign his chum seemed to be conducting.

"My word for it, that was a tough pull." The mate's voice sounded in the room beneath Cal, and was clearly audible. "I thought we were stuck on that sand-bank for good."

"Well," retorted a second voice, which Cal assigned

to Bangs, "if you had used a little common sense, you wouldn't have run aground in that beastly fashion. Here it's taken us nearly all the afternoon to get the 'Rover' off."

"The chart shows no bar where we struck," argued the mate, in self-defense.

"Pshaw!" said his companion, wearily. "That chart was made years ago. Besides, a baby in arms would have had more sense than to run into the bay at such a gait."

"If my memory serves, some one about your size was standing on the beach, and howling 'Let her go, Bruce,'" the mate retorted tartly.

"Well, well," Bangs responded, in a more conciliatory tone. "We may be both to blame. What's the use of eternally growling at each other? Let's take things easier; we're in the same boat."

Through a knot-hole in the scuttle covering Cal could see his captors seated at a box in the room beneath. He listened with all his ears. Who could tell what the rascals might let drop concerning the purpose of the expedition to Tower Island?

Mike brought in the supper, and it was attacked eagerly. A few moments of silence were followed by a burst of talk.

"I had almost forgotten," suddenly ejaculated Bangs. "About this time all my good Stroudport friends are weeping over the touching obituary that Wheelock was to insert in the papers."

Both laughed heartily. Cal listened in perplexity.

"I told you that I put my identification badge on the stiff, didn't I?" went on the Major, complacently.

"What do you mean?" demanded Bruce, with interest.

"I had a suspender badge issued me by the National Registry Co. to wear on my person. It was numbered, and in case I was found dead or unable to care for myself, directed the finder to telegraph the company and I would be cared for until my friends could be notified. I slipped that badge on the 'evergreen plant,' you know. They're bound to find it when my remains are discovered, for it's fire-proof. They'll wire the Registry Company, find that the badge belongs to Bangs, and there's additional evidence of my sudden and sad demise. See?"

"I call that a mighty bright idea!" rejoined Bruce, admiringly.

"These confounded insurance companies are so skittish about paying up when anything looks mysterious," continued Bangs, "that I think we left no stone unturned to satisfy them of the genuineness of my untimely end.

"Pilsingham, as you are aware, was to go to Pod Island next day to see how my attack of heart trouble was coming out. He, at least, would discover the ruins of the cabin, and notify Wheelock and the coroner.

"Result: my half-cremated remains are found in the ruins, where, presumably, when a lamp has

exploded, I have been seized with heart failure, and unable to help myself, have been burnt up. Alderman Patterson, though he's not in the game, will swear to my being on the island at nightfall, alone. The Doctor makes oath to my having heart failure in the afternoon; there is the identification badge; and the 'evergreen plant,' which is my size, all right. The coroner brings in verdict of accidental death; Wheelock gives me a good funeral send-off, collects the insurance, and we meet him with the yacht at Rockland when he gets the swag safely cornered."

The secret of the expedition was out, and Cal Morse was in possession of it! But oblivious of his presence, in their elation Bangs and Bruce talked on.

"And what am I getting out of this deal?" It was Bruce that made the inquiry.

"Better wait until we get it," retorted Bangs, with a laugh.

"Waiting be hanged!" said the captain of the "Sea Rover," explosively. "We're bound to get it, and I propose to know where I come in. Come, show up."

Bangs pulled a bundle of papers from his pocket, and selected a slip from them.

"Wheelock has the policies, of course," he said, "but here is a list of them, with the amount of each."

Bruce was about to take the paper when there came a sudden interruption. There was a rapid

discharge of firearms in the distance, and Mike came into the room.

"Shure, somebody's a-shootin' somebody ilse," he reported, in excited tones.

The slip of paper fell from Bangs' hand unnoticed as the two men started up in surprise. It floated quietly to the floor, where none save Cal, his eye tightly screwed down to the knot-hole, perceived it.

"It's that confounded Brandon," said Bangs, cramming the rest of the bunch into an inside pocket as he rose to his feet.

"Perhaps Fenderson has winged him," Bruce hopefully suggested.

"More likely got shot himself," was the retort, as the Major hurried from the room.

Bruce and Mike followed, and stillness settled down over the old stone house, while Cal Morse in the dilapidated room in the second story, rose from the floor, thrilled with the suddenness and completeness of the discovery he had made.

"What a plot!" he ejaculated. "A plot to defraud the insurance companies, and nothing else. Dr. Pilsingham was in it, just as Val surmised, and to him we owe all our woes, for he discovered that we knew something about the 'evergreen plant.'

"We knew enough to spoil things," he went on, "or at least to raise a suspicion that would lead to investigation and bring the plot to light. Pilsingham told Bangs what we had stumbled upon, and we were kidnaped and brought here, to be kept

till the policies are collected and the gang can skip out."

Cal had hit the nail on the head!

"Now," he continued, "there was a body placed in the cabin on the island, and the cabin was evidently fired. That body was the 'evergreen plant,' and, if I am not much mistaken, there is a case of body-snatching mixed up in this matter, for which job a certain party got a hundred dollars. 'Evergreen' must be the name of the cemetery where it was dug up. Holy smoke, what a scheme!"

Cal was so elated at his discovery that he forgot his surroundings; he forgot that Brandon might be getting himself into difficulty somewhere on the island; he forgot that, for all he knew to the contrary, Sumner Parker might now be lying in a watery grave, and the "Spitfire" at the bottom with him.

He had found out the Major's plot, and that thought completely absorbed him.

"The paper, the paper that Bangs dropped," he muttered presently. "He said that had a list of the policies on his life. There must, then, be others besides the one for a hundred thousand dollars he held in the Liberty Mutual. Wish I could get hold of that paper. I wonder if I can't?"

A hook and line might bring it up, he thought, provided he could start a board in the scuttle; but he had neither hook, line, or hammer. It happened, however, that when Mike had nailed down the cover,

in picking out his nails from a box of such things, he had encountered a big spike, and with characteristic impatience, had thrown it one side. Cal sighted it now, and set to work prying at the cover. By dint of much effort he started a corner board, and finally had the pleasure of wrenching it up.

As he worked, an idea for securing the paper from the room below had occurred to him, and he proceeded to put it into practice, working with all possible speed, for the Major and his companions might come back at any moment and interrupt him.

Having no string of any sort, he thought a thread from one of the blankets might answer; but being without a knife — this had been taken away by Bangs before he left the yacht — he found it impossible to ravel the firmly bound edges.

So he was forced to use the entire blanket for his fishing line. For a hook the spike was thrust through a corner of the cloth, and for bait a piece of tutti-frutti gum, which Cal luckily found in his clothes, chewed to a soft consistency, was stuck to the end of the spike. The blanket, spike down, was lowered through the hole, and the gum, after considerable maneuvering, was brought in contact with the slip of paper on the floor below.

It stuck there, of course, — did you ever see tutti-frutti gum that wouldn't stick to anything and everything? — and the paper was drawn up to Cal's eager hand.

Eager, did I say? It was so nervous that it trembled like a leaf as it grasped the little sheet and lifted it to Cal's eyes, for a mystery that had baffled him ever since his capture was now revealed, and its magnitude startled him.

And this is what Cal read: —

"Liberty Mutual,	$100,000
Franklin Life,	50,000
Chicago Mutual,	25,000
Provident,	10,000"

and so on down through a considerable list, the amounts growing smaller toward the bottom, but none less than $5000. The aggregate was footed up beneath, and below that was an item, "Premiums paid, $15,275."

"Whew!" Cal gasped, when he had scanned the slip. "Here's half a million dollars in twenty different companies. Oh, if Val only knew. How in the wide world can we stop their game?"

An hour passed before the tramp of feet below announced that his captors had returned, but long before that time he had replaced the board in the floor, and obliterated every evidence of his fishing exploit, except that he had not returned the paper.

Some one came scrambling up the ladder which Mike had that afternoon constructed to replace the rude post and cross-pieces, unlocked the door, and hurried in. It was Bangs.

"Oh, you're here, are you?" he said in a tone of relief.

"Where did you suppose I was?" asked Cal, somewhat tartly. "In Stroudport?"

The Major inspected Cal's fetters.

"All right," he muttered, turning to go. "But who in creation was that in the cave?" And apparently nonplussed at something, he withdrew, fastening the door after him.

Inasmuch as the bedstead that Val had found in the room on the previous night was devoid of mattress, or even slats, Cal's bed was composed of blankets spread on the bare floor.

It was not late in the evening when he lay down to sleep, and scarcely had he done so, when Bangs entered, and announced his intention of occupying the room with his captive. His motive was very evidently to maintain a strict guard over Morse, but he endeavored to cover his purpose by remarking —

"And I'll give you a better bed than you have there, if you think you can endure my company."

As almost anything was better than hard flooring, Cal was willing to entertain Bangs for the sake of the mattresses that the Irishman now brought. Two beds were made up side by side on the floor, and again Cal lay down and tried to sleep, while Bangs was soon snoring beside him. But between the tumult of his thoughts and the strangeness of his surroundings, everything about the old house had long been still before Cal began to doze.

Even then he was not destined to be undisturbed. Of a sudden, something hit him rather smartly on the face, and as he sat up, sleepily wondering what the trouble was, a voice from somewhere whispered,

"Cal, wake up."

CHAPTER XXV

UP GOES THE JOLLY ROGER

WHEN Val Brandon reached his refuge in the cave he was completely "tuckered out," and for a few moments lay panting on the blankets. Soon regaining his breath, however, he proceeded to reconnoiter.

He worked his way cautiously to the mouth of the cavern and peeped out. The "Sea Rover" was churning the water vigorously; Bangs from the beach was talking loudly to the deck hand, who had swam after and secured the raft; no one seemed to be thinking of the young skipper.

There appearing to be no immediate danger of an attack, Val lost no time in strengthening his position. He carried all his supplies, blankets, everything, a short distance up the passage, and then dragged the boat through the doorway and closed the door. He not only barricaded the door with the bar, but jammed the stern of the tender against it.

"There," he said, when this was accomplished, "I'll venture they won't get in without my knowing it."

Relighting the torch, by its ruddy glare he filled and lighted the lantern. He now transferred everything but the boat up the passage to the "pirate

lair," as he termed it. There was quite a pile when all the boxes, bags, pails, et cetera, were grouped together, and Val, scanning the collection, felt that he had not only established a commissary department far beyond his present needs, but had possibly so depleted the Major's store as to cause him actual distress. But without pausing to consider that phase of the matter at present, he lighted the oil stove, and prepared a satisfying meal. Water only was lacking to make his repast complete; but he contrived to make shift with the juice from a can of pears, declaring that not many hours should pass before he had found a supply of the necessary liquid.

But it was not, after all, a jolly meal that Val made of it. Seated on a box, with the viands spread out on the old table, down in that damp, musty hole in the ground, whose gloom was scarcely dissipated by the combined light of torch, lantern, and oil stove; one of his chums in captivity; one perhaps drowned — though Val hardly dared think of it — his yacht no one knew where, and a pack of rascals trying to get at him; where in the whole situation could one find cause for a vestige of merriment?

But Val resolutely shut out gloomy thoughts from his mind, realizing they could only make him downhearted, without changing his condition one iota.

"As for me," he muttered, peremptorily dismissing the subject as often as it intruded itself upon his thoughts, "I'm getting on. I'm a king now to what I was last night."

The probable builders of the tunnel afforded him change of thought, and he examined with interest the old drapings of the "lair." His meal finished, he decided to explore the one passage to which he was still a stranger — the branch leading off to the right from the shore tunnel, or "Water St.," as Val had named it. However, before doing this, he took the precaution to fasten the trap-door that topped the outlet into the cellar, and also made a trip to the barricade, for he did not want Bangs to steal a march upon him from any quarter.

Drawing back the tender he opened the door, stepped into the cavern, and peered out at the yacht. Apparently she had not budged an inch since running aground. Some one was lounging in the shade of the pilot-house, and as he watched, Bangs and the mate stepped into sight, and closely scanned the shore in the neighborhood of the cave.

"Wonder what they are planning to do now," muttered Val. He knew he could stand off an attack if it did not catch him napping. The chance of a surprise was the cause of worriment.

"Just for luck, to let 'em know I'm not asleep, I'll send a shot in their direction," he exclaimed, picking up the rifle, which he determined from now henceforward to have with him whenever practicable. Aiming at a point just above the wheel-house, he fired.

The puff of smoke filled the cavern, but not before Val saw Bangs and Bruce drop suddenly from sight.

With a chuckle the young captain withdrew, secured the door as before, and started upon his exploration.

Turning off from Water St. he followed the unexplored tunnel, lantern in hand, for an eighth of a mile before he met with anything of especial interest. Save in a very few places there was no planking in this section of the underground passage. It was almost wholly a natural rock tunnel, whose height and width varied greatly in different places — being at times so high he could not touch the roof, at others so low he was forced to stoop; and finally the passage narrowed to an aperture about two feet in diameter, through which he crawled, to find himself in a chamber of rock, several feet square, about the sides of which a flight of stone stairs wound upward in a rough spiral.

Up he climbed for perhaps forty feet until his head came against an iron trap-door, fastened on the under side by a huge bolt.

Shoving this back with some difficulty, Val pushed open the trap. A dazzling stream of sunlight greeted him; and when he became accustomed to the brightness and could understand his position, he uttered a whistle of amazement. He stood on the top of a stone tower, fully thirty feet from the ground. The tower was perhaps ten feet in diameter at its top, and a parapet, or wall, some three feet in height, encircled the summit.

Hasty examination showed several things. The tower stood on the eastern shore of the island — one

side of it, in fact, being washed by the waves—and, most singularly, the structure was both natural and artificial. The backbone of the tower, if I may use the term, was a shaft of rock rising from the water's edge. On the landward side of this a semicircular wall, or "bay-window," of stone masonry had been built from the ground to the summit of the shaft, with the spiral stairs inside. To give to the artificial portion the unscalable quality of the natural part, a deep coping had been made in the wall a few feet below the top, which would prove an effectual barrier to any one trying to climb up the stonework.

Val viewed all these things with wonder and gratification.

"I could not have asked for a safer or better lookout," he exclaimed exultantly. "'Twill take a longer and better ladder than Mike's to reach me here. Here, after a fashion," he mused, gazing about, "I can keep in touch with affairs on the island, for the grove is in sight, the harbor is in sight, and the 'Sea Rover,' and — by George!" he exploded, under the stimulus of a new idea, "here I can set a signal if any vessel passes."

And he immediately scanned the seaward horizon for a sail. None, however, was visible; but some one was moving through the bushes near the head of the harbor, and Val dropped behind the parapet as he reconnoitered.

"There goes Mike," he said presently. "Yes, and

Cal's with him. Poor old Cal, they must be taking him up to the house. It's as I thought. Bangs has broken his agreement, and intends to keep Cal in confinement. Oh, Major Bangs," he gritted fiercely, shaking a fist in the direction of the yacht, "you shall pay dearly for all this."

Two iron rings, one above the other, were fixed on the inner side of the parapet. They suggested a signal pole, and Val promptly decided it would be a first-class plan to prepare one. What to use for the purpose was a puzzler, until it occurred to him that one of the tender's oars would answer, and for a flag what better than the one he had found in the "lair"?

In less than half an hour Val had secured both oar and flag, and brought them, with hammer and nails, to the tower. Being destitute of either block or halyards, he nailed the flag securely to the oar blade and measured the rings, to assure himself the oar handle would fit, that all might be in instant readiness when needed.

The tide was now on the flow, and Brandon felt certain Bangs and his confederates would remain on the yacht till she floated. There being nothing further to do, and feeling somewhat the worse for wear, Val voted it a capital time to make up lost sleep.

Stretched out on one of the broad steps just under the deck of the tower, for several hours he slept soundly, lulled by the sound of the waves breaking

against the rocks below, which reached him faintly, like the echo of surf on beaches miles away.

When at last Val awoke with a start, his watch indicated six o'clock. He climbed to the top of the tower, and looked toward the harbor. The "Sea Rover" had been backed off the sand, but no one was in sight.

But when he glanced seaward his eyes met a sight that thrilled him with hope. Several miles to the eastward, plowing directly toward the island, was a steamer, her stacks belching a cloud of black smoke that swept away over the water and obscured the horizon behind her.

"At last!" exclaimed Val, with feverish eagerness. "Now up with the Jolly Roger."

It was the work of a moment to put the oar in place, and as the old piratical flag swung to the breeze for the first time in years, Val Brandon sat down on the parapet of the old tower and waited anxiously for the steamer to approach. Would she heed his signal?

CHAPTER XXVI

BANGS SCORES A POINT

PERCIVAL BRANDON would have laughed derisively if any one had told him that within a week after the beginning of his cruise he would be anxiously signaling a steamer with a pirate's flag from a tower on Tower Island.

But it was just so; and so great was his eagerness, that although the steamer was still too far distant to notice his signal, he could scarce resist the impulse to dance about, wave his arms, and shout at the top of his lungs.

In reality it was less than half an hour — though to Val it seemed an eternity — before the steamer came near enough for him to make out people on her decks. Now, if at all, his signal must be seen. More nervously than ever he watched for some token of response.

But now the steamer swung off, as if to pass the island at a greater distance. Val uttered a groan. Had he known she was a full mile nearer than her course usually took her, and that uncertainty regarding soundings alone made her captain cautious, this revulsion of feeling would have been spared him.

Imagining this new-found hope was about to

leave him, he pulled off his coat and waved it lustily, hallooing like an Indian as he did so; oblivious of everything except the steamer and his intense desire to attract her attention.

This action producing no visible effect, he dropped the coat, pulled the oar from its socket, and waved it desperately to and fro, until his arms ached from the violent exercise.

At last, fairly tired out, he replaced the oar, and was sitting dejectedly down again, when a colored pennant went fluttering up to the steamer's fore-mast head, and Val knew his efforts were not in vain. With an exclamation of thankfulness he leaped to his feet and enthusiastically waved his cap; but to this demonstration came an entirely unlooked-for response.

Ping! Ping!

There was a sharp report, and two bullets hurtled past his ears, barely missing his head. His attempt to attract the steamer had brought upon him the occupants of the island.

Val dropped to the floor, and crept to where his rifle lay. Then placing his cap on the muzzle, he slowly raised it to the edge of the parapet, intending to draw the fire of his assailants and determine their position. He did not care to look over himself and risk a bullet in the head.

No sooner did the cap show above the rampart than a succession of shots greeted it, whistling over the tower in a way that made Val shiver. The

fusillade ceased after five shots were fired, though Val still moved the cap along slowly at the edge of the stone-work.

"Only one man," he muttered, "and that's the last shot in his revolver. I'll take a look." And he cautiously did so, leveling his rifle before showing his head.

Fenderson was some hundred feet distant, in a clump of bushes, hurriedly reloading his revolver.

"Drop that pistol," called Val, determinedly.

Fenderson glanced up apprehensively, and catching sight of the rifle, backed by Val's face, slipped down out of view behind a boulder.

"Pull down your flag," he retorted, from his retreat, "or we will shoot it down."

"Then shoot," Val grimly responded, watching for the revolver's reappearance; nothing of the deck hand was visible, but the fellow would doubtless try another shot if he had the chance.

"Do you see the steamer?" queried Val, presently.

No response.

"She's putting off a boat," continued Brandon, "and if your jig isn't up inside of half an hour, my name is Dennis."

Silently the deck hand crouched behind his rock. He felt that for a man in his position discretion was the better part of valor.

But now came a hail from the direction of the house.

"Halloo!"

Three persons came hurrying into sight from out the grove, climbing over the rocks, and racing through the bushes toward the tower.

"Ho, Fenderson!"

The newcomers resolved themselves into Bangs, Bruce, and Mike. They would run for a distance, then pause and halloo, pointing first at the tower, and then at the steamer, and gesticulating as though bereft of their senses.

Finally they halted, and for fully five minutes held a consultation. During this time Val kept his rifle leveled at the deck hand's boulder, and alternately eyed his aim and the steamer.

The steamer had swung around toward the shore and stopped her engines. A boat was putting off, as Val had said, and was rapidly traversing the distance to shore. The craft was a good-sized one. Her upper deck was thronged with passengers, but she was not near enough for Val to decipher the name that glittered in gilt letters on her pilot-house.

The boat had started directly for the tower, but owing to ledges that cropped out offshore, was forced to turn aside somewhat, and pull more to the westward. At this change of direction Val began to call and gesticulate, holding the rifle with one hand while he beckoned with the other.

And now came an incident in the history of Val's involuntary trip to Tower Island that caused him as much exasperation as anything that occurred during his whole stay at that place.

The boat crew paid no attention to his outcry, but rowed obliquely past, toward a beach several hundred yards distant.

Glancing shoreward, Val found that Bangs was nowhere to be seen. The mate and Mike were going to meet the boat. Fenderson had crawled out of range, and hurried to join them.

"Come over here," shouted Brandon, forming a trumpet of his hands to better carry the sound to the occupants of the boat. "Over here. Come over here."

If the oarsmen understood, they did not obey. One of the men — there were four — turned at the sound, and nodded his head. Why should they make a landing on the rocks when a good beach was close at hand? They knew nothing of the state of affairs on the island.

Val's spirits went down to zero as he saw how matters were turning. It was useless to shout now; the boat was going farther and farther away every moment. Presently it was close to the beach. Then Bruce waved his hand in the direction of the tower; the rowers stopped work, and the boat tossed lazily on the swell while a confab went on between the party afloat and the party ashore. Though Val did not ascertain until some time later, the conversation was much as follows.

"What do you want?" demanded the man in charge of the boat, who had stopped fifty feet from shore.

"Nothing," returned Bruce. "The man on the tower has gone crazy, and we can't get up there to stop him. We came out here on a fishing trip. He fell and hurt his head in a storm, and has been 'out' ever since."

"Is that all?" ejaculated the spokesman, disgustedly. He glanced over at Val's figure on the tower. The excited gestures of the youth seemed to bear out the mate's statements exactly.

"He's crazy as a loon," asseverated Bruce, earnestly. "We are unable to do anything with him; he thinks we are trying to keep him here against his will."

The officer got his boat around, and headed for the steamer.

"I wish you joy of him," he exclaimed shortly. "But I'd advise you to get him down from there. He'll stop every vessel that comes near."

"You can't feel worse about it than we do," replied Bruce, apologetically. "It's bad enough to have him go crazy——"

"I suppose so," cut in the officer, brusquely. He gave an order, and the boat pulled for the steamer without further ado.

"Take me off," shouted Val, as the boat came back past the tower. "I want to get off."

The only reply was a revolving motion that one of the men made with his hand near his head, as if to imply that the young skipper "had wheels."

The steamer was soon reached, and the boat

hauled aboard. With a churn of her paddles the craft went off on her course, leaving Val in a state of dejection better imagined than described.

In the midst of his gloomy thoughts came a taunting laugh from somewhere out in the bushes.

"Did you ever get left?" queried a voice. It was the deck hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

VAL FINDS CAL AND ENCOUNTERS A LUNATIC

VAL had discovered that his tower could keep people in as well as out. Only the belief that other vessels might come within hail at more auspicious moments kept him from jumping to the ground, and risking broken bones and an encounter with Bruce and his mates that he might interview the steamer's men.

Now as the steamer was speeding from the island, the deck hand's taunt drew his attention shoreward, and it was well it did. Fenderson, after delivering himself of his sarcastic query, hurried away toward the harbor. The mate and Mike moved more leisurely in that direction, until Bangs presently came out of concealment and joined them. Then the quartet came together and moved rapidly in the direction of the cave.

It flashed upon the young yachtsman that an attack was planned during his absence. Bangs naturally wished to recover his missing provisions.

Val took down the signal oar and flag, and hustled down from the tower, fastening the trap behind him. He broke all records in reaching the barricade, but found nothing as yet disturbed. He pulled away

the tender, opened the door, and stepped into the cave.

As he emerged, something came floating up to the entrance of the cavern — the raft, with four persons upon it.

"Lucky thought," some one remarked in an undertone. "If that grub is in here, we will get it now."

"Do you think he would be fool enough to go off and leave it here?" another queried, in doubtful tone. It sounded like the deck hand.

"Well, I don't think he carted it away in his pocket." This from Bangs, in sarcasm.

"Steady, there," said Bruce, as the raft grated against the rocks at the entrance.

The sun had set, and dusk was deepening over the harbor, so that, while it was easy for Val to see the quartet on the raft, they were unable to perceive him in the gloom of the cavern.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Thrice in succession Val fired the rifle in the water directly in the faces of his enemies, the discharges throwing spray over them, and the flashes blinding their eyes. But greater than anything else was the effect of their mighty surprise.

"Ouch! Ouch! Le' me off!" The four started back with such suddenness that the raft tipped up and let them all into the water. For several moments consternation reigned supreme. For dear life they waded and swam out of range of the cave, temporarily disregarding the raft, which floated away empty.

Chuckling mightily, Val crept out to the entrance and listened.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated some one on the beach, when Val's assailants had all reached shore, "who in the old Nick is in that cave?"

"Must be Brandon," rejoined another. "Lordy! but I thought I was a dead man."

"How could Brandon get into the cave without our seeing him?" asked another, contemptuously.

"If you're so anxious to know who's in there, go in and see," was the caustic retort.

"Wasn't that Brandon on the tower?" Val recognized the Major's anxious voice.

"Certainly."

"Then, by the great horn spoon, Morse has got away!"

All conversation ceased. There ensued a scrambling up the bluff; then silence.

"Gone to see if Cal is safe," mused Val, as he withdrew from the cave and restored the barricade. "I think they'll be chary about investigating the cave again right away."

Supper that night consisted mainly of boneless chicken. Water for coffee was still lacking; but a second can of pears furnished more juice, which, heated over the stove, with coffee and condensed milk added, produced a sweet and decidedly "fruity" beverage.

"If I leave the tower unguarded for any length of time," mused Val, thoughtfully, as the chicken dis-

appeared, "they are bound to try to get possession there. If I stay on the tower, they'll get into the cave. Again, they may discover the passage leading from the house; and when they find Cal still at the house, they will either believe there is a third person on the island, who fired on them from the cave, or else suspect the existence of the underground passage. They know it was impossible for me to reach the cave ahead of them, traveling on top of the ground. And if they suspect a tunnel, what is more natural than they should try to dig into it?

"Look at it as I will, the prospect ahead is one of wearisome excitement and worry, for I can't stand watch all the time."

The more Val pondered the situation, the more worried he grew. He now saw clearly the danger to which he had exposed himself by revealing the cave entrance, in the first place, and secondly by appearing in the cave so shortly after being seen on the tower.

Lost in cogitation, time passed rapidly. Should he, or should he not, seal up one or more of the passage entrances? At all events he would not close the water entrance, for it was his purpose to leave the island in the boat at the first chance. But before this was done, he wished to accomplish two things: obtain water, and communicate with, and if possible release, Cal.

"I'll go to the house now," he finally determined, "and try to find where Cal is."

Ten minutes later found him in the garret of the old mansion. He noiselessly removed from the scuttle in the floor the covering which Mike had replaced after making futile search for him in the garret and tower. From the room below came the sound of vigorous snoring. The moonlight, streaming in, showed two forms upon the floor. It touched the features of Cal.

To arouse Cal without disturbing his companion was a problem. Val picked off a fragment of plaster from the ceiling beneath, and tossed it at his chum's upturned face. His aim was true, and Cal opened his eyes, as his ears caught the whisper:—

"Cal, wake up."

Carroll Morse arose from his blankets and peered about for the source of the whisper.

"Val," he responded softly. "Val, where are you?"

"Overhead, at the scuttle."

"Thank heaven, it's you," said Cal, still in a whisper, stepping slowly and cautiously to the center of the room, and raising his face toward his chum's, which was, however, scarce distinguishable in the gloom. "How did you get up there, and how are you, old fellow?"

"Right as a trivet," responded the skipper of the "Spitfire," cheerily, for it was as good as a tonic to get even this indistinct view of Cal. "Are they using you decently?"

"Enough to eat, but Bangs has put the handcuffs on my ankles. If I escaped, I couldn't get far."

"I felt certain Bangs had broken his agreement with you; and told him so," said Val. "But we'll have you out of there, handcuffs or no handcuffs. Who is that snoring on the floor?"

"Bangs; and I say, Val," continued Cal, suddenly bethinking himself, "I've found out the gang's secret."

"What is it?"

As briefly as possible Cal related the conversation he had overheard between his captors, and the incident of fishing for the paper, while Val listened with deep interest.

"Great smoke!" Val muttered, when the recital was concluded. "We must manage to put a stopper on that program. Come, move that box over here, get on it and give me your hands. We'll give the gang the slip this very night and row for help."

Cal cautiously brought the box and placed it beneath the opening, but in trying to get his fettered feet upon its top he slipped and came down upon the floor with a jar that aroused the Major, whose snoring instantly ceased.

"What's that?" he inquired, sitting upright. "Where are you, Morse?

"I believe you're trying to escape," he exclaimed roughly, coming to Cal's side, and noting the position of the box beneath the scuttle. "Come back and lie down."

He forced Cal to recline once more, and removing

the handcuffs from his ankles, put one on Cal's left wrist and the other on his own right.

"There," he chuckled, as he composed himself to sleep again, "I think we'll know where you are hereafter."

Believing that nothing more could be done in Cal's behalf at present, Val waited until the Major's heavy breathing denoted his somnolent condition, replaced the cover, and went back to the lair.

Like lightning out of a clear sky had been revealed the reason for Bangs' expedition to Tower Island. All that before seemed so mysterious was now as clear as day. The "evergreen plant," the strange behavior of Dr. Pilsingham, the reason for the ruse that resulted in their capture aboard the "Sea Rover," —everything, in fact, was explained. And now, knowing that a member of the gang was still in Stroudport awaiting the settlement of the insurance policies on Bangs' life, Val's thoughts turned more than ever to ways and means of escape.

"They shall never get the money, if I can possibly prevent it," he gritted through set teeth, "but it's a pretty clever scheme, after all."

However, as his cogitations grew more lucid, his excitement subsided somewhat.

"After all," he mused, seating himself on the table in the lair, and addressing himself to the lantern, "those twenty life companies won't all pay Bangs' claim at once. Some will take sixty and ninety days, even after satisfying themselves of the

validity of the claim; and as to its validity,—well, of course an inquest will be held at once, and the gang's man will see that it is done at the earliest possible moment; but while the chain of evidence seems complete,—there's the fire, the heart failure, the half cremated remains of a man closely resembling Bangs in size, the identification badge, and what not,—yet some of the companies will be suspicious and go into the matter very thoroughly before paying.

"I know 'em," he added with conviction, "and guess I can spare a day or two to getting Cal free before making a dash for freedom in the boat."

Having reached this conclusion, the pangs of thirst assailed him, and he started in search of water. He emptied the egg pail, and went out by the cellar trap, pail in hand. Believing there would be a patrol somewhere about, he employed great caution in his movements. Without especial incident, and unmolested, however, he finally reached the beach on the southwestern shore, where it was his hope to find a brook emptying into the sea.

He was now in an unvisited portion of the island. The moon was shining brightly, and though not full by a day or two, it was yet sufficiently brilliant to make objects quite distinct. Realizing that his figure must show quite plainly upon the sand, he hurried onward, keeping a sharp lookout for both water and foes. He had taken the precaution to bring the rifle.

After a walk of perhaps a quarter of a mile along

the beach he broke into a run at sight of a dark streak athwart the sand ahead — for he was nearly consumed with thirst — and came to a small brook that trickled down from a rocky bluff. A succession of bowl-shaped hollows formed the bed of the stream down the slope of the rock. Val dipped the pail and drank his fill. The water, though warm, was clear and sweet.

Not having seen a sign of any one since leaving the tunnel, when he had finally filled the pail ready for the return, he did what for the past ten minutes he had been longing to do — took a dip in the surf. Not a breath of air was stirring, and the heat of the day still clung to the island. Hastily disrobing, he hid his clothing, with the pail and rifle, in a shadowy recess, and plunged in.

Emerging presently from the surf, dripping from head to foot, and all in a tingle of pleasurable exhilaration, he beheld some one running toward him on the beach, not ten rods off. The moonlight defined him quite clearly, running at top speed, and waving both arms in the air.

The beach was fairly wide, for the tide was out, and before Val could reach his clothes, the man had approached near enough to make his voice heard above the surf.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried. "Come with me to the moon. Come to the moon."

Brandon thought he had rather not; at least, not without more clothing. He seized his possessions

and scrambled to the highest place attainable on the bluff, and began dressing as rapidly as his moist condition would permit.

His pursuer halted on the sand below, and with face upturned and hands outstretched, pathetically implored the skipper of the "Spitfire" to "come with him to the moon — to the moon."

It was Marshall, the engineer of the "Sea Rover."

Brandon's alarm quickly subsided when he ascertained its true cause, for he did not believe the engineer was dangerously insane.

"Wait a minute, can't you, till I get dressed?" he returned, in a decided tone. "I can't go to the moon without any clothes on."

The sense of this statement seemed to penetrate the frenzy of the lunatic. He subsided until Val completed his toilet and descended to the beach, the young skipper having in the meantime cast about for some method of handling his companion. He had never encountered a lunatic before.

"Marshall," he asked pleasantly, placing a hand on the engineer's shoulder, "why do you go to the moon to-night?"

"Don't call me Marshall," remonstrated the engineer, petulantly. "I am not Marshall. I used to know a man named Marshall, a long, long time ago. He was engineer on the 'Sea Rover,' that sailed from Stroudport years ago, to go to Tower Island."

"Why did she go to Tower Island?" asked Val.

"There was a man named Bangs," continued Marshall, like a man talking in his sleep, "who burnt himself up, and then hired the 'Sea Rover' to take him to Tower Island. Marshall was the engineer, but all this was years ago — many years ago."

"Why did Bangs go to Tower Island?" questioned Val, curious to see if the engineer would corroborate what he already knew of the Major's plot.

"For money — money," was the prompt response, uttered in a feverish tone. "Little dollars and big dollars — dollars that shine — shine like the moon — like the *moon*."

He was fast relapsing into frenzy again when Val grasped him firmly by the shoulders, and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"You are Marshall," he declared firmly. "Try to think. You are Marshall, the engineer of the 'Sea Rover.'"

The engineer passed a hand wearily across his brow.

"No — no — no," he returned half-hesitatingly. "You are wrong. Marshall is dead."

"You are Marshall," insisted Brandon, determinedly. "Now, Marshall, where did Bangs expect to find the money he came to Tower Island after?"

"I am not Marshall," was the response, "but gold is yellow and the moon is yellow, and the money was to come from the moon — from the *moon*."

His voice rose higher and higher, until the last

words were uttered in a shriek. He grasped Val tightly by the arm.

"See," he cried, pointing exultantly aloft, "the moon, *my* moon. I am going there, and you will go with me."

"How will you go, Marshall?" asked Val, pulling himself out of the madman's clutches with some effort.

"I tell you I am not Marshall," was the indignant protest. "I am not Marshall; I am the Man in the Moon. Over the sea and through the air, past the stars, we will sail, to the moon, my moon. Come."

Brandon made another attempt to reduce the man to reason. Again he grasped him by the shoulders, turned his face away from the moon, and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Have you a file about you?" he inquired.

"I have a pocket file in my jack-knife," returned the engineer, surprised into a semblance of sanity by the change of subject.

"Let me borrow it," continued Val.

Marshall handed him a pocket knife containing a small file.

"What do you want of it?" he asked. "I tell you you won't need any file on the ——"

"Perhaps not," interrupted Val, "but I want this to use before we go. Besides, we must get provisions to take, and a bag full of air, for there is no air on the moon."

"It's a lie," the engineer said bluntly. "I am

the Man in the Moon, and live on the moon. There is plenty of air there, and provisions to last forever."

"Yes, but we can't go to-night," returned Val, decidedly.

"Why not?"

"Because the moon isn't full yet. It's not large enough to hold us both. You can see that for yourself."

"That's so," returned the lunatic, turning and critically eyeing the moon. "I did not think of that. It would tip over, wouldn't it?"

"Well, I should say so. Tip over quicker than you could say Jack Robinson just the minute we got on it. It takes a full moon to hold two people."

"That's a fact," assented the engineer.

"And the best thing we can do," added Val, quickly, "is to wait for it to grow larger."

"You are right," said Marshall, quietly. "I am much obliged to you for mentioning the matter. Ugh, what if we had gone up to the moon and it had tipped over!"

Having reached this temporary solution of the moon question, Val ventured another suggestion.

"You'd better go back to bed."

"I suppose I had," was the reply. Grasping at the idea with avidity the engineer turned and hurriedly retraced his steps along the beach.

Val went along shore in the opposite direction, making a complete circuit of the island before he at last entered Water St. through the old cellar.

As he scratched a match to relight the lantern, there sounded a rumbling and crunching in the seaward end of the passage. A gust of dust-laden air swept up the tunnel, and blew out Val's match.

"Ow—ow—ow! Help! Help!" came in muffled tones from the direction of the barricade.

In sudden dismay Val paused to listen. The outcry still continued. Carrying the lantern unlighted for fear of being discovered, the young skipper moved cautiously down the passage toward the scene of the disturbance.

CHAPTER XXVIII

VAL LOSES THE TENDER

THE tones of distress grew more distinct as Val advanced, but it was soon evident that the sufferer was not in the passage itself, though he might be outside the barricade.

At last, when Val believed he must be near the bow of the tender, he came abruptly against an obstruction. His hands informed him that the passage from top to bottom was completely blocked by a mass of dirt, stones, and broken timbers.

"The roof has caved in on top of the tender," muttered Val, in consternation, when he had investigated as thoroughly as possible without lighting the lantern, "and I believe it has entirely stopped up this end of the passage."

Such was the fact; and somewhere in the cave-in was the deck hand, for it was his startled tones that broke the silence of the night.

"Ow—ow—ow! Will nobody help me? Help! Help!"

Now on general principles Val would not have hesitated in succoring his enemy if he could have reached him; but as several cubic yards of débris

intervened, he thought it best to keep quiet and permit some one else to come to the rescue.

Fenderson's shouts indicated some pain, and more fright; but he appeared to be in no danger of dying. Bruce presently came to his relief.

"What's the matter with you?" he inquired roughly. "For heaven's sake shut up that racket. One would think you were dying."

"The confounded cave has caved in and taken me with it," snapped Fenderson, with pain in his voice. "Lend a hand here and help me roll this stone off my foot."

"Well, you won't need to guard the cave any longer, or I miss my guess," said Bruce, grimly, as he complied. "There don't appear to be much cave left. Hope Brandon is in there now. He'll be bottled up for one good while."

With which heartless remark he completed the release of the deck hand, and the pair moved beyond the range of Val's ears. Then Brandon relighted the lantern, and surveyed the wreck.

A whole section of the planked ceiling had collapsed, no doubt needing only the weight of the deck hand walking overhead to make it fall. The tender was invisible beneath several tons of sand, rocks, and rotten wood — buried so deeply that Val at once relinquished hope of ever digging it out; while the end of the passage was completely blocked.

"It's very clear I won't use that boat to escape,"

he thought ruefully, as he retraced his steps to the lair. "And by George!" he went on, in sudden alarm, glancing at the ceiling above him, "if that piece of tunnel caved in so easily, what is to hinder more of it falling down and burying me?"

This was a startling thought, and coming on top of the day's adventures, aroused him to instant action. Tired though he was, he did not rest until all his supplies and equipments were placed in the passage leading to the tower, which he had named "Tower St.," where the roof was solid rock. And with the comforting assurance that nothing short of an earthquake or dynamite could bring that down upon him, he lay down and slept.

Val's first act on rising late the following morning was to transfer his entire outfit to the space at the base of the stone tower. The collapse of the roof on Water St. had thoroughly alarmed him, and he determined to have as little to do with the planked portions of the tunnel as possible, and to use speed whenever compelled to pass through them.

"Greatest wonder in the world," he muttered, as he tugged the boxes and bundles through the aperture into the bottom of the tower, "that more of that pesky ceiling hadn't given 'way before now, and buried me."

When everything was transferred, the space at the foot of the stairs was pretty well filled. Val next prepared breakfast, rejoicing in a cup of decent coffee.

Presently repairing to the top of the tower, he

found the sun well up, and the day breezy and delightful. Far on the northern horizon, too remote to signal, was a sail. He could discern no one on the island; and everything appeared to be quiet on the yacht; but from the wooded headland at the harbor entrance came the sound of an ax. Val decided that an effort was being made to replenish the "Sea Rover's" fuel supply. Certainly the craft needed more fuel if she was to make the trip to Rockland, or anywhere else, when the insurance claims had been adjusted.

Despite the loss of the tender, Val had not given up all hope of escaping from the island. If he could but release Cal, together they might get possession of the yacht and steam away. Various schemes ran riot in Val's mind, as he presently descended from his lookout, and threaded the tunnel gingerly houseward, with Cal's release in mind.

As he climbed the rickety ladder through the gloom —for he had extinguished the lantern, and left it in the passage below — a loud thump sounded on the platform above, and an object whizzed down past him, narrowly missing his head in its fall.

For a moment he was seriously disposed to retreat. Was Bangs lying in ambush for him above?

But a moment's consideration decided the question in the negative. Bangs could not know of his coming; and if he did, he would hardly betray the fact by throwing missiles at him. He would rather wait till Val had climbed up, and then seize him.

However, he fancied the darkness of the landing above was somewhat lightened; and when there came a second thump on the flooring, the brightness apparently increased. But nothing more fell past him, and taking heart, he climbed up to investigate.

As the reader is aware, the tower was separated from the room in which Cal was confined by a rough wall of brick, evidently built long after the house itself. As Val's head rose through the opening in the landing, he saw a hole the bigness of two bricks, a couple of feet above the floor. This was the source of the light, and through it he caught a glimpse of Carroll endeavoring to push in a third brick.

"Halloo, Cal," he whispered.

"Is that you, Val?" was the guarded response, as the work on the wall ceased.

"That's what. Where's Bangs, and the others?"

"I think Bangs is down at the harbor on the yacht. Mike is downstairs, but he is liable to come in any minute. He has orders to visit me frequently."

"Before anything else, then, take this file," said Val, presenting the engineer's jack-knife through the hole. "I got it from Marshall, who, by the way, has gone crazy as a result of his accident. Put it in your pocket, and if we don't succeed in getting you out before some one comes, use it to cut through the chain on your ankles."

"What sort of a place are you in?" asked Cal, eagerly taking the knife.

"It is an old tower, walled up like a well, with a

ladder for stairs. There is a landing here, and I judge there used to be an opening where this brick wall stands. But, Cal, I've had a picnic since I left the yacht."

"So Mike told me," was the reply. "How did you manage to get out of the cave, with them watching you, I want to know, and how did you get into the tower?"

These questions had been puzzling Cal ever since he had first been apprised of his chum's presence.

"The island is an old pirate's retreat," was the response. "There is fully half a mile of underground passage, reaching from the head of the harbor to this tower one way, and across the island to another tower in the other direction. The cave was one outlet of the tunnel, but it caved in last night when the deck hand walked over it.

"But we can't stop to talk now; there'll be time enough for that after you are out of this den. However, there's no use in trying to get you through this wall. I'll pull you up to the garret through the scuttle, as we started to do last night."

"That will be better," Cal acquiesced. "It will make less noise and take less time."

"So you think it will make less noise, do you?" inquired a sarcastic voice behind him.

In consternation at this interruption, Cal arose from his stooping posture at the hole, and turned about. Major Bangs had entered the room noiselessly and unnoticed.

CHAPTER XXIX

REGARDING A BRICK WALL AND A LADDER

CARROLL MORSE backed up against the brickwork as Bangs confronted him with a sardonic smile upon his face.

"Have you discovered a speaking tube?" inquired the Major.

Cal retained his position against the hole, and said nothing.

"Come, are you deaf and dumb?" Bangs demanded roughly. "Get away from that wall. What are you doing there, and who are you talking to?"

There was nothing to do but obey.

"Just in the nick of time," declared the Major, at the sight of the hole. "I see; trying to get away again, eh?"

"None of your business," muttered Morse, exasperated at the turn affairs were taking. Furthermore, he had come to so detest the very sight of the big rascal, that it was with difficulty he could contain himself when he was near.

"So?" roared Bangs, in sudden rage, shaking a fist in Cal's face. "We'll make it our business, you'll find. What's in that hole?"

"Go in and see," was the tart rejoinder.

"Shut up," the Major growled. He knelt down and peered into the aperture, keeping, however, at a safe distance.

"I need a light," he muttered presently, dissatisfied with the meager result of his inspection; and in response to his summons, Mike brought a lantern. It was the one Val had knocked off the box two nights previously, and the broken chimney was still doing duty.

While waiting for the light, the Major tried, unsuccessfully, to enlarge the hole with his hands. When the lantern came, he held it to the opening and tried to peer past into the darkness beyond. Unsuccessful in this — for the light was squarely in his eyes — he endeavored to shove the lantern through the hole, but the orifice was too small to admit it.

"Get a hammer or a crowbar, or any old thing to knock these bricks out," he commanded the Irishman, impatiently; and while the man went on his errand, put a hand in the hole and worked away in an attempt to loosen the masonry. Apparently he had forgotten that Cal had been conversing with any one on the other side of the wall.

Presently he uttered an exclamation of surprise, and attempted to withdraw his hand. It would not come. Something held it fast. Before he could bring any strength to bear in an effort to release himself, for he was in a rather awkward position, the entire arm was suddenly pulled into the hole,

and his shoulder, and, indeed, his head, brought up with some force against the wall.

"Let go," he howled, making an attempt to push away with his feet and free arm; but some one on the other side — whose identity was no mystery to Cal — had seized Bangs' arm in a grip of iron, and whenever the tension was released it was simply to bring the Major up against the wall again with greater violence, until the ruffian groaned in impotent rage, and Cal Morse felt like dancing a jig in his delight at his enemy's discomfiture.

Val Brandon was having a lively time at the Major's expense, and did not feel the slightest scruple at causing his antagonist a little vexation, if vexation is the proper term to apply to the state of mind in which Bangs was soon placed by his unlooked-for predicament.

He finally ceased pulling, and tried to grasp his antagonist; but Val had taken his grip on Bangs' forearm, out of reach of his fingers, and the attempt was unsuccessful. Then began another desperate pulling and tugging, the Major nerving himself for a final struggle.

Val grasped his opponent's wrist with both hands, and braced his feet against the bottom of the wall, determined not to yield an inch; but something had to give, and at a mighty tug from the Major the foot of the wall, which was merely laid on the flooring, bulged out into the room. Bangs, suddenly released, sat down with a hard thump, while a small

section of brickwork was forcibly projected into the room, and a pair of feet appeared to view behind it.

Bangs arose, and there was fire in his eye. Apparently he had exhausted his stock of expletives, for he said nothing; but taking the wooden bar Mike brought, proceeded to demolish the wall in short order.

The Major inserted the bar in the upper hole, intending to pry out the bricks beneath. But before he could do so a warning came from the other side of the wall.

"Take that bar out."

The Major promptly consigned Val to a far distant region, and began to pry.

"I tell you to take that bar out," reiterated Val. "If you tear down the wall, I'll shoot every man that comes through."

Bangs' wrath was a sight to behold; but he recollected that Brandon was able to make good his threat, and desisted from his onslaught.

The reader will wonder why Val did not allow Bangs to play into his hands by completing the work of tearing down the wall. This done, it would appear he could have forced him, at the muzzle of his rifle, to surrender Carroll Morse; and so possibly he might, but for the fact that he had left the rifle at the bottom of the tower with the lantern.

The very idea which we have outlined was in Val's mind, when to his chagrin it occurred to him his arsenal was at the foot of the ladder. His threat,

therefore, was an empty one, but none the less effective.

Believing the attack on the wall would recommence as soon as Bangs heard him creaking down the rickety ladder; knowing, also, that the wall would not last long under the Major's vigorous blows, he made the threat in order, if possible, to gain sufficient time to climb down and secure the rifle and return before a shower of bricks began falling down the tower, or his enemy could get into the tower and keep him from regaining the landing.

The moment Bangs desisted from work, Val descended the ladder, in hot haste. It shook and creaked beneath him. When he was still some feet from the bottom there was a cracking and splintering, and the ancient affair suddenly collapsed beneath his weight. More quickly than it takes to relate it, Val was precipitated to the foot of the tower, while the fragments of the ladder fell upon him and forced him to the ground.

For a moment he lay half stunned. His head had come in contact with the wall, and ached severely. He had fallen face forward, and the section of ladder above had come down and pinned him by the shoulders. Recovering himself presently, Val lifted off the weight that held him down, and arose painfully to his feet. For the moment all fight was knocked out of him; but when examination showed him little the worse for his tumble, his mind reverted to his enemies.

With the ladder demolished, his errand after the rifle was futile. He was now unable to ascend to the landing, nor could the Major come down after him. The luck that enabled him to keep out of Bangs' clutch seemed to desert him in his efforts to rescue Cal. More than ever he execrated the Major, the island, and the whole exasperating business.

Sounds from above showed that operations on the wall had recommenced. To have a brick or two fall on his head would be unpleasant, to say the least, and Val stepped back into the passage. Thump following thump denoted the rapid demolition of the masonry. Presently a veritable avalanche of bricks came tumbling down; a bright light showed above, then a head peered over the edge of the opening in the landing.

"Gone," said Bangs, in disgust, vainly trying to pierce the gloom below. "There was some kind of a ladder, but that's gone, too."

"What made all the racket we heard?"

Another head appeared at the opening. The voice was that of the mate.

"The scamp must have fallen down. Probably the ladder gave way under him. I hope he broke his infernal neck," returned Bangs, vindictively.

"How do you figure he got into the tower? That beats me," asked Bruce, after a moment's thought.

"Don't ask me," retorted Bangs, impatiently. "This island is full of mysteries, and that fellow is a veritable jack-in-the-box. He pops up at every turn.

We think he is settled in one place, and presto! up he turns in another."

"Well, what do you propose to do about it?"

"Do? What would you do?" was the acrid reply. "Do you want to risk your life by going down into this hole? I'm no great coward, but I know a whole hide when I have it."

The pair finished their inspection, and withdrew. No attack from that quarter seemed imminent — indeed, before one could be made, some means of descent must be found — for neither Bangs nor Bruce appeared anxious to venture below.

After waiting a few moments longer, Val, with his head still buzzing from the effects of his fall, relighted the lantern and went back to the other tower, where he bathed his bruises as best he could.

"And so," he soliloquized, "ends my attempt to rescue Cal by way of the underground passage."

If he had but known it, so ended all his communications with his chum during their stay on Tower Island; but Val could not know that then.

CHAPTER XXX

A CURIOUS DOCUMENT

MATTERS now settled down into a routine that was almost monotonous, if the term monotony could be applied to a condition that was fraught with personal danger and required constant alertness.

The collapse of the ladder having cut off communication with Cal, Val made no further attempt to release him, trusting rather to Cal's own activity — now that he was supplied with an implement for cutting his bonds — to release himself.

The balance of that day Val spent at the tower, going twice, at noon and at night, through the tunnel to make sure no attempt at breaking in was in progress. And this same inspection was made for the next two or three days with unfailing regularity, at morning, noon, and night, the trap in the cellar, the cave-in on Water St., and the blind trap in the house passage being the especial points of inspection.

As the tender was buried beyond recovery, Val considered the feasibility of capturing the raft, and escaping from the island upon it. But such an idea was presently abandoned. It was true the raft was unsinkable, and fitted with oars, but it was unwieldy

to handle, slow to navigate, and a sea of any size would surely sweep over and wash off his supplies, even if he were lucky enough to cling on himself.

Such a thing as seizing the yacht single-handed he scouted at once. In the first place, he soon found that a regular scheme of guard and patrol had been inaugurated by his enemies.

The engineer, whose vagaries, while perhaps harmless, still made him a constant care, was kept under surveillance on the yacht, where, as a rule, either Bruce or the deck hand constantly remained. The raft, also, was never left unprotected for any length of time when on shore, and was usually hoisted aboard the yacht when not in use.

Val concluded that Mike had been detailed to watch Carroll, since the Irishman appeared but seldom. The Major appeared occasionally, here and there, but never came near Val's retreat. Yet Brandon became aware that he was kept under careful espionage, especially whenever a sail came in sight.

This, however, did not happen so often as he could wish; and, to his great disappointment, no craft of any kind came near enough for him to signal.

Neither was any attempt made to scale the tower, though Val lived somewhat in fear of it. But he knew Bangs would not be rash enough to attempt an assault by daylight, in the face of the rifle and two shotguns; nor was he certain his enemy would be able to batter open the bolted iron trap at the top

of the stairs should he succeed in scaling the tower under cover of darkness.

Val slept in the midst of his supplies at the bottom of the tower, and each night before retiring carefully barricaded the entrance to the tunnel with boxes, not only as a sort of protection against attack from that quarter, but to shut out as much as possible the uncanniness that associated itself with everything pertaining to this ancient underground retreat. The long dark passage, stretching away into the earth, seemed like a huge speaking tube built to carry the messages of giants, and the deep silence that enveloped everything like a pall, save when the pounding of the sea made itself both heard and felt, was at times broken by strange rumblings and ghostly whisperings, creakings, and crackings, that seemed to portend things unspeakable.

It was all very well to be running his own ranch — almost anything was better than Bangs' clutches — but the yachtsman soon decided that a very little of this mysterious place would answer for a lifetime.

It was now that Val appreciated the bundle of novels which he had captured in the last boat load of effects. Bangs had made a very decent selection, and they helped him while away pleasantly many an hour which otherwise would have been most tedious.

During the afternoon of the day the ladder collapsed, Val prepared a number of messages to throw into the sea. He had no bottles; but there were

a number of screw-cover tin cans, containing maple syrup, and the like. The contents of these he placed in tins previously emptied of fruit and meats, and with paper obtained from the blank fly leaves of the novels, prepared a letter for each can, reading as follows: —

"Friday, July 11, 189–.

"To Whom this Can May Come: —

"Carroll Morse and Percival Brandon, sons of H. J. Morse and Wm. L. Brandon of Stroudport, are kept prisoners on Tower Island, so-called, somewhere off the Maine coast.

"A gang of five men, headed by Major E. J. Bangs of Stroudport, are keeping us here. Morse is a prisoner at the stone house. I escaped from Bangs some days ago, and have managed to keep out of his hands since, being in a stone tower on the northeast side of the island, but without means to get away.

"Whoever finds this, please either send it to our parents, or send help to rescue us, and capture the gang who are engaged in carrying out a plot to defraud life insurance companies of five hundred thousand dollars.

"Percival K. Brandon."

Six copies of this were made — this being the number of cans — a copy placed in each can, and the covers screwed tightly on.

"Slim chance of any one picking them up in time to do us any good, I fear," he muttered, when, having thrown the cans far out into the water, he sat watching them bob on the swell; "but, at any rate, it makes me feel that I am doing all I can."

A day later another incident befell him. He upset

the water pail and every drop ran out before the receptacle could be righted.

To make another trip to the brook, risky though it was, seemed inevitable, until Val's wits came to his aid, and suggested the possibility of striking a vein of water in the passage. To think was to act. With a box board sharpened to an edge at one end, he proceeded along Tower St., looking for indications of dampness on the floor. In some places the sides of the tunnel were wet from water dripping through the crevices, but it passed off through the seams of the rock bottom and there was no way to accumulate it. Such places, therefore, Val passed by. But when he reached the junction of the passage with Water St., he found the ground actually water-soaked, and began digging. When the depth of a foot was attained, water was already beginning to accumulate in the bottom of the hole.

"I've struck 'ile,' sure enough," he exclaimed enthusiastically. At that instant the board struck something much harder than sand.

"Struck bottom, too, I guess," he continued, peering more closely into the cavity. "The soil must be thin here, so I'll scrape the bottom clean, and let the hole fill up."

A surprise was in store. The rock bottom he expected to find was not there; but in a few minutes he had pulled a small wooden keg from the sand, and was scanning it eagerly by the lantern light.

"What can it be; pirate treasure?" he queried.

"Pshaw! no. It's too light to be filled with gold; but I believe we'll investigate this phenomenon before digging farther."

And leaving the hole to fill with water, Val carried the keg to the tower, and smashed in an end with the hammer.

Something had rattled inside the keg as Val carried it, and that something — the keg's sole contents — proved to be a small copper can, securely sealed. With the can opener this was cut open, and a small piece of parchment was eagerly drawn forth.

As, trembling with excitement, Val held this up to the lantern, he saw a number of lines of oddly fashioned characters traced in black ink, surmounted by the geometrical figure of a triangle. At the corners of the triangle were roughly drawn a tower, a horse, and a fish, respectively; the first-named being at the lower right-hand, the horse at the lower left-hand, and the fish at the top, or apex.

As for the characters composing the lines, they were unlike anything Val had ever seen before. Each was composed of a single vertical mark, with shorter marks extending to right or left horizontally, and occasionally from these short marks, or arms, other still shorter marks branched up or down. Some looked like capital "E," others like "F" and "L"; but with these exceptions there was nothing that looked familiar.

"What in the world can it be?" was Val's per-

plexed thought. "Is it a foreign language, a cipher, or what?"

And I can assure you that for the next two days this document, so oddly placed in his hands, formed the object of much study and conjecture; but its meaning still continued to be a mystery. Val had had some trifling experience in constructing ciphers, as well as in solving them; but if this was one, it seemed based upon a principle of which he had never heard. When he scanned the characters, and counted those recurring most frequently, he was astonished to find more than a hundred different ones; and being accustomed, in his own attempts, to have each letter of the alphabet represented by one character, this multiplicity of symbols bothered him very much.

Up to Sunday night, five days from the time he landed on Tower Island, and six since the "Spitfire" left Stevens' Wharf, he had discovered no clue whatever to the unraveling of the cipher — if it was a cipher, of which he was by no means certain.

But on Sunday night something occurred that for the time drove all thought of the parchment out of his mind. He had finished his nightly tour of inspection, and was about to build the box barricade and retire, when he was startled by an outcry in the tunnel.

"Help! Help!" it said. "Oh, help! Will nobody help me?" And these ejaculations were interspersed with groans, which the passage brought to Val's ears with startling distinctness.

"Confound the measly luck!" he muttered, recov-

ering from his momentary consternation. "Some one has caved in another piece of the tunnel roof. I judge he fell inside, this time; and what under the canopy shall I do to get rid of him?"

As the outcry continued, without coming nearer, the young skipper proceeded cautiously up Tower St., rifle handy, lantern extinguished, but ready for immediate relighting, without meeting any one or seeing anything until he emerged into the lair. Here was the source of the outcry. Some one seemed to be lying in the middle of the chamber, for the utterances came from that direction.

"Who are you?" demanded Val, boldly.

The groans ceased. For a second there was a silence; followed by the unlooked-for remark:—

"I am the Man in the Moon."

The unexpected reply to Val's question was such a relief to his overstrung nerves that he laughed almost hysterically. The engineer, though crazy, appeared harmless. It would have been different with the deck hand.

Val lighted the lantern. Flat on his back lay the engineer, his hair and clothing disheveled, and covered with dirt and sand from head to toe.

He looked up at Val listlessly as the lantern was lit, and resumed his groans.

"How did you get here?" questioned Val.

"Through the roof," was the response, and Marshall lifted an arm aloft to the shattered window overhead, through which he had fallen.

"Of course," said Val, catching sight of the aperture, and the shattered frame. "Stop groaning a minute, won't you? Are you badly hurt?"

The lunatic raised himself on one elbow and looked himself over.

"No, I think not," he replied uncertainly. Then rising unsteadily to his feet, he made an attempt to brush the dirt from his clothing, eyeing Val sharply as he did so. After a moment's pause, he seemed to recognize the young skipper. Stepping to his side, he seized him by the arm.

"I have been hunting for you. The moon is full to-night. It is time to start. Come."

"Where are you going?"

"They have been getting wood to go for the dollars," began the engineer, excitedly. "They have painted out her name and call her the 'Petrel,' but she is the 'Sea Rover' yet in spite of the paint, and the steam that would have sent her after the dollars shall drive her to the moon!"

Val grasped the engineer by the shoulders and looked him in the eyes, as on the previous night. It seemed to be the only way to control the wandering mind.

"Look here," he exclaimed firmly, "what can you do with the 'Sea Rover'? Who is on board her?"

Marshall's eyes glowed craftily.

"Bangs and Bruce are at the house. Mike is guarding young Morse, and Fenderson is guarding me on the steamer, ha, ha, ha! Yes, he is guarding me

with his arms and legs tied so tightly that he cannot move an inch,—not an inch. A fine guard, ha, ha, ha!

"Sixty pounds of steam on the gauge — sixty pounds — and more coming, enough to drive her to the moon,—do you hear,—to the *moon!*"

For a moment Val's eyes swam. One word seemed to write itself on his brain; one word, and its letters spelled *Escape.* But still he hesitated.

"Are you telling me the truth?" he questioned eagerly.

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," retorted the engineer, solemnly. "Come, we must start at once."

There was risk here, but Val decided to take it. If it was a trap to ensnare him, he might be captured; but if the engineer spoke truthfully, what was to hinder their leaving the island, and leaving it at once?

He conducted Marshall to the cellar exit, and in a few minutes both stood on the beach, where the raft was drawn up.

The yacht was anchored but a short distance down the bay, and such good progress was made that within half an hour from the time the engineer had fallen through the roof, the pair stepped on the deck of the "Sea Rover."

Val clung tightly to his rifle when they went aboard, for he still had lingering fears that this episode might be a ruse to get him into the power of his enemies.

But his fears were at once dissipated, for the deck of the steamer was entirely deserted. A muffled cry from a human throat sounded forward, as Val walked toward the pilot-house.

"Hear him," chuckled the engineer, in great delight. "The guard of the Man in the Moon, tight as a cork in a bottle."

"Where is he?" inquired Val.

"In the galley. He'll keep, my guard!" replied the lunatic, as he stepped into the engine room.

Val entered the galley. There were no lights on the yacht, but the moonlight showed the deck hand on the floor, bound hand and foot, his face turned away.

"Let me up," he entreated.

"Why should I let you up?" asked Val; "I don't think you deserve any sympathy from me."

Fenderson gasped with surprise, and rolled painfully over until he could see his visitor.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"The engineer says we are going to the moon. At any rate we are going to leave Tower Island immediately, and you are going with us."

"The engineer is a lunatic, but if I hadn't gone to sleep you wouldn't have caught me in this fix."

"Probably not. I am glad you went to sleep," returned Val, dryly. "Are you suffering?"

"I have been in pleasanter positions, but suppose I shall have to stand it," was the sullen reply.

Evidently Fenderson did not expect relief from the newcomer.

"You will have to stand it, I fear," retorted Val; "I think you have reached the end of your rope."

He examined the cords that confined the deck hand, finding them securely fastened. Then he went aft, and found the engineer piling fuel into the furnace, keeping time to his work with a wild refrain in which the words, "we are going to the moon" predominated.

"Well, engineer," asked Val, "are you ready to start?"

"One hundred pounds of steam," cried the lunatic, exultantly, "and more coming — more coming."

"Then let's start at once."

The raft was hoisted on deck. Then the steam windlass began revolving. Two minutes saw the anchor up, and as the yacht swung free, Val grasped the wheel and signaled to start.

"Ting." The propeller began to revolve, and as the ripples commenced to curl about the bow of the "Sea Rover," Val seized the whistle cord and blew blast after blast, signaling defiance to Bangs and all his crew. The crazy engineer, leaping on deck, waved a hand to the luminary above his head, and shrieked out his wild refrain, "We are going to the moon, to the moon."

Slowly down the harbor crept the "Sea Rover," for Val knew little regarding the depth of water. Remembering roughly the course taken by Bruce

when he brought the yacht in, he adhered to it as closely as possible, and reached the outlet in safety.

"Full speed ahead," he signaled the moment the headland was cleared, and away skimmed the stanch craft, carrying Val Brandon on one of the wildest rides of his life.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DECK HAND REPENTS

ALTHOUGH he had not entered the wheel-house of the "Sea Rover," alias "Petrel," since the night he had fallen into Bangs' hands, Val soon made himself at home there. Lashing the wheel as soon as the yacht was fairly clear of the island, he rummaged about in the chart locker, where he found a full set of charts of the Atlantic coast line. After some calculation, he determined his position as about seventy miles from mainland, and not far from Penobscot Bay.

Val was aware that at Rockland he could get telegraphic communication with Stroudport, as well as the assistance of the law; in fact, everything needed to carry out the plans that now hastily formed themselves in his head. He determined to steam for that city forthwith.

The moon was full and the sky without a cloud. A mighty sense of relief came over Val, as he gazed ahead over the moonlit sea, the sensation a man might feel when first released from prison and allowed once more to breathe free air.

As the yacht sped on the young skipper kept a close watch for steamers or sailing vessels. If aid could be

obtained from such a source, he could return at once to Tower Island and do the work waiting there, without taking time to run up Penobscot Bay.

Three things caused him anxiety: when Bangs discovered that the yacht was gone, would he not try to leave the island? If so, the officers Val proposed to bring back would find their bird flown, and now he regretted the defiant salutes he had given with the whistle.

Then, what if trouble should arise with the engineer? So long as Val humored his fancy, all was well; but if the yachtsman's movements should clash with Marshall's crazy notions about sailing to the moon, what would be the outcome?

Thirdly: in such an event, could he hope for aid from the deck hand? In fact, would it be safe to place any reliance upon that individual, if, in event of trouble with the engineer, aid from some source were needed?

"I'll cross no bridges till I reach them," he finally decided, after cudgeling his brain with these problems for some time.

From time to time above the surge of the swell and the hiss of water at the bow, Brandon could hear the hoarse chant of the lunatic; and glancing back apprehensively on the occasion of an unusually loud outburst, he caught sight of Marshall gesticulating wildly. His voice sounded weird and uncanny as he raised it in his unceasing, monotonous song of, "We are going to the moon, to the moon."

However, so long as the boiler steamed well, he did not care much if the engineer sang and danced. He was, however, surprised to note the speed that Marshall was getting out of what he supposed to be green wood fuel. The yacht was certainly making thirteen knots; but he afterward ascertained that a quantity of dry wood had been found stored at the old mansion on the island, and thus the mystery was cleared up.

At the end of half an hour the island was nothing but a dark blur on the water astern. Despite the uncertainties of his position, Val was beginning to be lulled into a belief that all would run smoothly throughout the trip, when the engineer suddenly darted from the engine room, gazed doubtfully aloft at the moon, and started on a run for the pilot-house. Hearing Marshall's footsteps hurrying along the deck, Val shut and locked the wheel-house door just as the lunatic's head appeared at the top of the side ladder.

Clambering to the upper deck, the engineer yanked at the door; but of course it failed to open.

"Let me in," he demanded.

"What do you want?" inquired Val, with bold front. "Isn't she running all right?"

"Let me in," reiterated the engineer, running his fingers through his hair till it stood erect, and gave him a wild aspect, while his eyes gleamed brightly and shifted constantly in their sockets.

"You are off the course," he said excitedly.

"You aren't steering to the moon; you are steering away from it."

Val had expected this complaint, and was prepared for it.

"Go back to your engine," he admonished. "I'm steering this yacht, and know what I am about. You can manage the engine, but you don't understand steering."

"But I tell you you are not steering to the moon," howled the engineer, frenziedly, yanking at the door-knob as though his life depended on his getting into the pilot-house. "Let me in; I'll show you how."

"Look here, Mr. Man in the Moon, there is one thing I know how to do, and that is to steer this yacht, and I am going to do it. I have gone to the moon just as many times as you have, and you can't tell me anything about getting there. Now what are you kicking about?"

"You are going away from the moon instead of toward it," remonstrated Marshall, somewhat subdued by the force in Val's tones. "You must turn the yacht's head about, I say." He stopped tugging at the door-knob, for he found it did not do the slightest good. His was a strange mania; on everything but the moon topic he appeared now to be fairly rational. But when once his fancy began to run riot upon that subject, all else in his mind was obscured. There seemed to be only one way to control him, and that was by firm, decisive word and action.

"You would turn the yacht's head about, would you?" queried Val.

"Of course," returned the lunatic, instantly. "Turn her around right off. We will never get to the moon this way."

"That is where you are out of your reckoning," said Val, decidedly. "Look here," he went on firmly, "don't you see that if we put about and run for the moon, that by the time we get to the eastern horizon she will have sailed right over our heads, and left us behind?"

The engineer gazed up at the moon, and then looked doubtfully toward the east.

"But if we run to the west," continued the helmsman, "we will meet the moon by the time she gets down to the western horizon, and won't get left. Go back to your engine; I can steer this yacht!"

The crazy man went slowly aft, his head bowed in thought. He disappeared in the engine room, and Val heard no more from him for some time.

There was an adjustable bunk on the starboard side of the wheel-house; this Val swung down from the wall, and taking a half hitch around the spokes with a piece of rope, lay back at his ease.

But in less than two minutes his ease was disturbed by a noise in the galley beneath; there was pounding and thumping, interspersed with utterances in the voice of the deck hand.

This disturbance continued, until Val's curiosity got the upper hand and he decided to investigate;

but as it would not do to leave the wheel for any length of time while the yacht was running at that gait, he signaled the engineer to slow to half speed, and then hailed him through the speaking tube.

"I have some calculations to make regarding our trip to the moon, and I can't do it while the yacht is running at this speed. Shut her down a little. I'll soon be through."

The lunatic gave a hoarse answer, and presently the speed of the "Sea Rover" became appreciably less. Val waited to see if the engineer proposed to investigate his feigned work of calculation, but he did not leave the engine room. There was nothing visible on the water ahead; and Brandon lashed the wheel, stepped to the deck, and entered the galley.

"Well," he began, "what do you want?"

The deck hand had managed to roll himself about until his feet were against the forward bulkhead. Then, laying on his back, he had doubled up his knees — his ankles were of course securely tied together — thus raising his feet, and by vigorously doubling up and undoubling his knees had succeeded in making quite a racket on the woodwork with his shoes.

"I want to get up," he replied in a decided tone.

"I think you are safer where you are. If that is all you have to say, I'll thank you to keep still. I have enough on my hands without you."

"Look here," exclaimed Fenderson, earnestly,

"I know I have treated you mean, but I am sorry for it; I am, really."

"Your repentance is rather tardy," responded Val, "and for a chap who has done his best to kill me, I think it is decidedly ill-timed. You should have felt sorry before."

"What I did was by Bangs' orders," pleaded Fenderson, in extenuation of his conduct. "He said that if you got away it meant state's prison for us all."

"And so you were willing to add to the first crime by a worse one," retorted Val. "I am afraid it will go hard with you when we get ashore."

"Where are you heading?" asked the deck hand, eagerly.

"It is none of your business, but as you will find out sooner or later anyway, I will tell you we are making for Rockland."

"You will have trouble in getting there."

"I expect to," retorted Val, shortly. "Why?"

"The engineer thinks you are steering for the moon. He is as crazy as a loon. Do you think he will let you steer for shore, when he thinks you ought to steer for the moon? Not much."

"What has all this to do with you?" demanded Brandon. "The engineer will give me trouble enough, I'll allow; do you think I'm fool enough to let you loose to help him?"

"You are too hard on a fellow," exclaimed the deck hand, deprecatingly. "I hoped you would do

the fair thing by me, and I could be of a good deal of help to you, but it doesn't seem to be any use to talk with you."

"The fair thing!" ejaculated Brandon, in a vexed tone. "You talk to me about the fair thing—*you!* It strikes me a term in the state's prison would be about the fair thing for you."

"Come, now," pleaded the deck hand. "Just listen a minute. I was hired as deck hand and fireman to go on this steamer to an island on the Maine coast; I didn't know there was anything shady in the job; I didn't know any of the rest of the crowd from Bangs down till Bruce hired me, and I went aboard in Stroudport. When you and Morse were brought aboard, that looked funny; but what was I to say against it? I wasn't running the steamer.

"They used you pretty well on the 'Rover.' I couldn't kick 'cause they abused you, could I? for they didn't. And if I had kicked, what good would it have done?

"Of course, by this time, I knew there was something shady going on; but I didn't know what, and I don't know now.

"We reached the island, and you got away. I was glad of that for a while, and wished the other chap had gone too, until Bruce told me that if you got away to peach on them, it would mean the jug for the whole of us.

"I asked him what he meant. 'Don't try to be innocent!' he said to me. 'If you're nabbed, it will

go as bad with you as the rest of us.' We near had a fight over it. I swore I wouldn't do another smitch of work while the yacht was at the island; but I had to, for I had to have grub, and they had all of it ——"

"Not quite all," interrupted Brandon, who was getting interested in spite of himself.

"You did a neat little job, I'll admit," said Fenderson, with a laugh. "But all the time I was only acting under Bangs' and Bruce's orders, for they forced me to obey, partly by threatening to starve me out if I didn't, and again by half convincing me that I stood in for as big a punishment as the rest of them if we were caught. I ain't any saint," confessed the deck hand, "and I know precious little about law on sea or land; but I ain't as black as I'm painted, and I wish I could make you believe it."

Val Brandon was puzzled. Should he accept the statement of the deck hand, and give him his freedom, temporarily at least? The circumstances were against Fenderson, in that his apparently frank confession might be forced from him by his knowledge that the yacht was headed for Rockland, and he would soon be in the hands of the law unless he made some move on his own behalf. Was his repentance real or simulated? This was the puzzler.

"If you are blameless, why did you try to shoot me on the tower?" asked Val, presently, after turning the matter over in his mind for a moment.

"I didn't," replied the deck hand, promptly, "I only wanted to scare you into getting down."

"It looked that way when you riddled my hat with bullet holes," returned Val, sarcastically.

"Look here," said Fenderson, with some warmth, "we aren't getting ahead very fast. You showed that hat for a ruse. I knew you weren't fool enough to have your head in it. A baby would have better sense, and you know it. I fired at it just to scare you by showing a little marksmanship; for I can handle a pistol, if I do say it." He spoke with some pride. "But you fooled me," he added, "for I was so anxious to show I could hit, that I emptied my revolver, and gave you a chance."

Val said nothing. He was trying to fix upon a course of action.

"Now, look here," continued Fenderson, persuasively. "We can make a bargain right here. You let me up. I'll help you keep the engineer in control, and take the yacht wherever you say. When we get ashore, if you want to hand me over to the police, I won't say a word."

"I'll think about it," replied Val, turning to the door, for he wanted to see how the "Sea Rover" was getting along, and felt he had left her alone long enough.

"Don't do that. Let me up."

"Not now, I will decide presently what to do."

"I tell you you can't handle the engineer," began the deck hand, warningly.

At that moment Val was surprised to feel an increase in the speed of the yacht, which was indicated by the quickened throbbing of the propeller. The throttle had again been opened wide, and the yacht was forging on at top speed.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE ENGINEER TAKES THE WHEEL

As Val abruptly left the galley, by the port door, he heard hasty footsteps on the starboard deck.

Up the ladder he hurried, to the upper deck, his motions accelerated by sounds that indicated a like action on the part of the engineer on the opposite side. But it was a losing race.

When Val gained the upper deck the engineer was at the wheel, and the yacht presently gave a violent lurch as the helm went hard down. His mad moon song rang out frenziedly as he grasped the spokes and brought the yacht about until the orb of night hung fairly over the bow.

"Ha, ha, ha, we are going to the moon! I will steer her there myself."

As Val entered the wheel-house, Marshall caught sight of him.

"Get out of here," he said, turning fiercely on the yachtsman. "You're a traitor. You didn't steer toward the moon at all. You would have run us ashore. I will steer, and run the engine, too. Go away, or I'll throw you overboard."

Thus had the situation on board the "Sea Rover" suddenly changed. Val had been caught napping,

and it looked as though he would have a tussle to get the upper hand again.

"You are mistaken," said Val, in a firm voice, "you did not give me time to make my calculations."

The engineer groped around in the dusk of the wheel-house, and brought Val's rifle into view.

"Do you see that?" he said excitedly. "That is for traitors. I am going to the moon, and I shall steer and run the engine, too. I'll shoot you and drop you overboard pretty soon. The Man in the Moon will have no traitors."

Percival Brandon backed out of the wheel-house, and hurried down the port ladder.

At this rate the madman might have them ashore, and that perhaps within the hour, for the yacht was getting up among the islands.

It is true the yacht's course had been altered, but the moon's position had also materially changed, and to bring it over the bow the engineer had headed the yacht about south, in a direction where the chart showed several islands.

"I'll settle this fuss double quick," thought Val, stepping along to the engine room. "Shut off steam, and he'll not reach the moon in a hurry."

But the port door of the engine room was locked. The small circular window on that side was fastened as well. There was a door leading into the engine room from the saloon, but this proved to be fastened from the engine room side. So also were the starboard door and window. The lunatic had apparently

laid his plans with great cunning. The doors were of stout oak and did not look as though they could be easily forced. The windows were too small to pass through, if forced open, for the engine room was mainly lighted by a skylight. Might not this be unfastened?

Clambering hastily to the upper deck abaft the stack, Val would have had his hands on the skylight in a moment more. But there came a cry from the wheel-house; Val glanced forward past the smoke-stack just in the nick of time. Flat on the deck behind the stack he dropped as a bullet from the rifle whizzed astern. It was intended for him.

There was nothing to do but to descend to the lower deck, if he could. The smoke-stack did not afford sufficient protection to enable him to work at the skylight, nor to open it if it were unfastened, for the engineer had a window at each side of the rear end of the wheel-house, which gave him a range of the upper works except immediately behind the stack. Seizing a favorable opportunity, Val leaped to the lower deck before the engineer could again take aim.

It was now apparent to Brandon that he would have to test the deck hand's sincerity, whether he wished to or not. Anything was preferable to being at the mercy of the lunatic, and together Fenderson and himself could probably force the engine room, and shut off steam.

Val crept forward on the starboard side, keeping close in the shadow of the upper works. The engi-

neer was unused to steering, though he had held the wheel before, and the yacht had gotten her nose around a trifle to the west, so the starboard side was more in shadow.

Val glanced uneasily ahead as he moved forward. He could not get an unobstructed view of the horizon, for the "Sea Rover's" bow was too high; but alarmed as he was, what he did see filled him with still greater alarm. Ahead, nearly dead ahead, so far as he could determine, a dark mass lay on the water. But this was not all. As he looked, this dark mass was suddenly swallowed in a cloud of low-lying mist that had swept up unnoticed from the south. Misty streamers flew overhead. A dense fog was hurrying down on them, and there was land almost under their bows.

Val rushed into the galley. Closing the door after him, he stepped to the deck hand's side.

"Have you a revolver?" he asked.

"Yes," responded the prostrate man. "Let me up and I will give it to you."

"Will you swear to do as I tell you?" hastily asked Val.

The deck hand answered in the affirmative.

Val rolled him over and secured the revolver from a hip pocket. Then he whipped out his knife, and in a moment the late captive was sitting up, rubbing his wrists and ankles.

"What's up?" eagerly asked the deck hand, still rubbing.

"The engineer has gotten possession of the wheel. He also has a rifle. He has left the engines going at full speed, and fastened every door and window to the engine room."

"Oh, well," returned the deck hand, in a reassuring tone, "the steam will go down if he doesn't tend the fire. When he goes aft, we can get into the wheel-house."

"We are heading straight for an island, there is a dense fog coming down on us, and if we do not stop inside of five minutes we will be ashore, heaven knows where. We must force one of the engine room doors."

With what alacrity he could muster, Fenderson came to Val's aid. He could scarcely stand up, so long had his limbs been confined, but the sincerity of his repentance seemed apparent in the effort he made to obey Val's summons. Hastily repairing to the saloon, together they threw their weight against the oaken engine room door. It cracked and creaked, but did not yield.

"Again," commanded Val. "Give it to her."

Once more they surged against the door, without starting it, and again and again, with the same result. It was well made, and, better perhaps than the builders would have believed, it stood the sudden pressure brought against it.

"No use," groaned Fenderson, at last, after several valuable minutes had been expended in fruitless effort. "Let's try the other doors."

But Val was not at the end of his resources. A heavy table occupied the center of the saloon. It was lashed to the floor by fastenings which could be severed in a moment, as Val had noticed while on his involuntary voyage to the island.

"Here," he exclaimed, "help me cut this table loose. We'll use it for a battering-ram."

The deck hand saw the utility of the idea at once. The table was quickly released from its fastenings. Turning it on its side, Val stepped between the now horizontal legs, and seized the upper one nearest the engine room door. The deck hand grasped the upper one of the other pair.

"Back up to the after bulkhead," instructed Val. "Then let her go ahead for all you are worth."

After a short back up to gain momentum, the end of the table went ahead with a resistless bang against the door. It yielded suddenly, and Val almost fell over the table leg.

Recovering himself, he scrambled through the opening, grasped the throttle, and shut off steam. Then throwing over the reversing bar, he admitted steam once more into the cylinders, until the propeller was churning full speed astern; but the screw had revolved only a fraction of a minute on the reverse, when there was a grating under the yacht's keel, then the shock of sudden stoppage.

The "Sea Rover" was ashore.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ON THE SEARCH

THURSDAY morning the Harpsboro steamer landed a bright-looking young man, clad in a navy blue yachting suit, at its Stroudport wharf.

The youth in question made his way rapidly up the dock, and directed his steps up Exchange St. He had not gone far when, in his eagerness, he plumped squarely into a gentleman going in the opposite direction.

"Halloo, Mr. Brandon," the youth exclaimed, instantly recovering himself.

The gentleman, who regained his equilibrium with a muttered apology, glanced at the speaker, and instantly grasped his hand.

"How do you do, Hartwell? Why, I supposed you were on a cruise with the boys."

"On a cruise with the boys?" echoed the other in astonishment. "They haven't gone, have they?"

"Went Tuesday morning," declared Mr. Brandon. "I supposed they were going to call for you."

"So they were," returned Farleigh Hartwell, a look of perplexity wrinkling his brow.

"And you haven't seen them?"

"Neither hide nor hair of 'em."

"That's mighty funny," was Mr. Brandon's response. "Come to my office and we'll just talk this matter over."

Mr. Brandon's office happened to be close at hand, and the two were presently seated therein, and gazed anxiously at each other for a minute without speaking.

"You don't suppose ——" began both in the same breath.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. When Mr. Brandon opened the door, he was confronted by the Stroudport City Marshal; in response to Mr. Brandon's invitation the Marshal entered.

"I will trouble you but a moment," said the official, pleasantly. "I merely wish to know the address of your son and his friend Carroll — um — um ——" He paused and delved into an inside pocket and brought out to inspection a paper. "His friend, Carroll Morse," he concluded.

Mr. Brandon eyed the paper apprehensively. Hartwell's unlooked-for appearance in town had prepared him for almost anything in the way of news.

"What do you want of them?" he quickly demanded.

"Read the paper for yourself," replied the City Marshal, proffering the sheet. "We received it by mail Tuesday forenoon."

As the reader will surmise, it was the letter that Val and Cal had mailed to the police on the morning of their departure. An expression of relief came

over Mr. Brandon's features as he read it, but he answered in some perplexity:—

"Well, I don't make head or tail of it."

"Neither did we, at first," replied the City Marshal, "but subsequent developments have proven that the remains of a recently deceased man have been removed from Evergreen Cemetery, and we surmise that this is a clue to the disposition of the body. For this reason I want to communicate with your son and his friend. Where are they?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Brandon, shaking his head dubiously.

At this juncture came another knock on the office door, and in filed Sumner Parker's father, Carroll Morse's father, and old Captain Bucklin, who had given Sumner some instructions on navigation, and loaned him the carrier-pigeons.

The apprehensive look on Mr. Brandon's face seemed reflected in the countenances of the newcomers. The old Captain muttered under his breath, as he took a seat:—

"The devil's to pay. Yes, *sir*. I say the devil's to pay."

"What's that?" questioned Mr. Brandon, catching Captain Bucklin's utterance. "What's the matter?"

"It means," burst out Mr. Parker, who could hold in no longer, "that some rascal has stolen your boy's yacht and carried my son off in it."

"How do you know this?" demanded Mr. Brandon, rising excitedly to his feet. "I have been

apprehensive that something was wrong because our boys did not call at Harpsboro for Farleigh Hartwell, here," he indicated that young gentleman, "as they planned to do. What have you heard?"

"They didn't sail the yacht beyond Pod Island," exclaimed Mr. Morse, sententiously. "Give him the letter, Parker. Let him see what he makes of it."

Mr. Parker fished a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Mr. Brandon.

"The greatest outrage!" he muttered in a choking tone, "the greatest outrage ever perpetrated!"

The paper was the letter Sumner had sent by carrier-pigeon. Mr. Brandon read it carefully through and passed it to Hartwell.

"That explains where Sumner and the yacht are, but where are Val and Cal?" he said in deep anxiety.

"Where are the pictures?" questioned Farleigh Hartwell, who had finished perusing the note. "When did you get this letter? And what's this nonsense about my broken arm, I'd like to know?"

"We just left the pictures at a photographer's to be printed," was Mr. Morse's reply. "The pigeons reached the Captain's place an hour ago, and we are here in consequence."

At this instant came another rap on the door. In came Manager Culverson of the Liberty Mutual.

"Good morning, everybody," he exclaimed in a hearty voice, not noticing for the moment the general air of gloom that pervaded the room.

"Well, it seems our boys are distinguishing themselves on their yachting cruise," he went on cheerily. "Have you seen it?"

"Seen what?" asked Mr. Parker, quickly.

Manager Culverson produced a copy of the *Stroudport News* and read aloud the following item:—

"Hope Island, July 9.

"Prompt assistance at a critical moment saved Mr. Cheney Killen, a boarder at the Willows, from a watery grave last night.

"Mr. Killen went out canoeing after supper and lost his way in the gloom. His canoe was accidentally upset, and being but an indifferent swimmer, and encumbered with clothing, his situation became desperate. After drifting for some time, clinging to the upturned canoe, his cries finally attracted the notice of the crew of a yacht anchored near. One of the yachtsmen, whose name we understand is Parker, rescued Mr. Killen from his dangerous plight."

"When is that dated, did you say?" Mr. Brandon asked, after the Manager had finished. "July 9?"

"That would make the rescue take place Tuesday night," went on Hartwell. "The yacht must have been stolen after Sumner got back to her. But where were Val and Cal all this time?"

It was now Manager Culverson's turn to ask questions. Briefly he was made acquainted with the facts at hand — that the yacht and all three of her crew had apparently reached Pod Island in good order on Tuesday night, and had anchored there; that the subsequent adventures of Sumner and the

yacht were outlined in the letter that had come by pigeon post; but that nothing was known of Val and Cal's whereabouts.

With opening eyes Mr. Culverson perused the pigeon post letter.

"The boy's having a hard time," was his comment. "Can it be possible he actually saw the Major burn up? We need him at the inquest.

"Say," and he rose to his feet. "The boat for Hope Island leaves in ten minutes. I'm going down to attend the inquest on the death of one of our big policy-holders, who died there Tuesday night under rather peculiar circumstances — the identical Major Bangs that Sumner mentions. Now why don't we all go down together and see this Cheney Killen? I believe he can throw light on this matter."

An hour later the entire party, barring the City Marshal, landed at Hope Island. The house known as the Willows was near the steamer landing. Young Killen was pointed out to them lounging in a hammock.

"Excuse me," exclaimed Mr. Parker, approaching the occupant of the hammock, followed by his friends, "but is this Mr. Cheney Killen?"

The young man replied that it was.

"Are you the person who was rescued from the water on the night of the 8th, by a young fellow named Parker?" went on Mr. Parker, in suppressed excitement.

"Well I should rather say I am," ejaculated young

Killen, with energy, "and a mighty good job the chap did for me when he hauled me out. Why, what's the trouble?"

Cheney Killen sat up as he looked around on the group of anxious-faced men, and realized that something was the matter.

"What was this Parker's first name?" demanded Mr. Morse, anxiously. "Where did he come from, and was he in a yachting party?"

"I've been trying to think of his first name ever since," said young Killen, regretfully, "but I cannot remember it. It was Somers, or something like that."

"Sumner," substituted Mr. Parker, delightedly.

"That's it, that's it," returned Cheney Killen. "Sumner Parker, of Stroudport, stopping at Peaked Island for the summer, and on a yachting cruise in the sloop 'Spitfire.' That was what he told me."

"But do you know what became of him, his chums, or the yacht?"

It was Manager Culverson who now took up the thread of interrogation.

"I suppose they sailed on their cruise."

"Well, they didn't," said Mr. Culverson. "The yacht was stolen that night, with Parker on board of her. There doesn't seem to be the slightest clue to the whereabouts of his two companions, the sons of Mr. Brandon and Mr. Morse, my friends here, unless you can tell us something. So far as we can

ascertain, you are the last person in this vicinity who saw anything of the party."

Cheney Killen uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"How do you know the yacht was stolen?" he asked excitedly.

"Got a message from Parker by carrier-pigeon," chimed in Mr. Morse. "Won't you please tell us exactly what happened the night you were rescued?"

Cheney Killen outlined the story of his mishap.

"Parker was the only one aboard when I was there," he said in the midst of his story. "He told me about the plan of their cruise while I was shaking off the effects of my chill; but said that he was afraid that something serious had happened. A steam-yacht had run in a little while before and told him that one of their party, a young man that they were going to pick up at Harpsboro, Harley, I guess the name was ——"

"Hartwell," corrected that person, eagerly, "that's myself."

"You!" exclaimed Killen, incredulously. "You don't look as though you had just broken an arm."

"Broken an arm?" queried Hartwell. "Sum mentioned my broken arm in his pigeon message, but it's all Greek to me."

Killen continued.

"This steamer had sent in a boat to tell them you had been picked up in the channel, clinging to an upset boat, with an arm broken. Parker's two

mates went aboard of her, and had not returned when I was on the 'Spitfire.' Parker believed the yacht had gone to take you to Beeg Island for a doctor."

"And I haven't been away from Harpsboro for four days until this morning," declared Farleigh Hartwell, in deep wonder, "and never broke an arm in my life."

"Do you know the steamer's name?" It was Cal's father who asked this.

Killen was obliged to reply in the negative.

"This is the second chapter of the mystery, I fear," said Manager Culverson, looking around at his gloomy companions after Cheney Killen had concluded. "I think we had better go over to Pod Island next, and see if there is any clue to be found there."

This seemed an eminently proper thing to do — in fact, not one of the party would have dreamed of going back to Stroudport without first making a thorough inspection of the island in question.

Cheney Killen, who by this time was almost as interested in the matter as the others, secured a large dory, and the seven went ashore half an hour later in the very cove where the "Spitfire" had anchored on the night of the 8th; but, needless to say, there was no trace of the party there.

For some time they tramped over the island, looking everywhere, and hallooing at intervals, as though they expected an answer from the yachtsmen.

The coroner from Harpsboro, who had come over to conduct the inquest on the charred remains found in the ruins of the cabin, and some of the members of his jury, assisted in the search, which presently ended without the slightest clue by which the mystery could be unraveled.

"I am convinced there is nothing here," was the conclusion reached by Mr. Brandon, finally, as the searchers came together at the cove. And, loath as they were to acknowledge it, it voiced the convictions of his companions.

Manager Culverson retaining Sumner's letter in his possession, was left to attend the deliberations of the inquest, while the others returned to Hope Island. The steamer landed them in Stroudport at four o'clock, young Killen having now become so excited over the matter that he insisted on accompanying the party to the city to see the pictures which the photographer had hoped to have printed and finished by the latter part of the afternoon.

"I have seen a good deal of the Maine coast," he explained. "Possibly I may be able to recognize the locality from the pictures."

The films had been printed when the seven anxious ones reached the studio.

But it was not Cheney Killen who identified the locality in which Sumner Parker had been driven ashore in the "Spitfire." When Captain Bucklin had adjusted his glasses carefully and fixed his eyes on the diminutive photographs the artist brought

out, he looked once, and once only, before he exclaimed, in a tone of conviction:—

"Do I know that island? Well, I rather reckon I do." He held up the picture that Sumner had taken of the island with the huge stone upon it, near that on which he went ashore.

"That's Stone Horse Island, down near Codville," he went on impressively. "An' I have good reason to remember it, for twenty-one years ago come November I piled up the 'Nancy Jane' on that island in one of the stiffest snow-storms that ever struck the coast."

At first light the following morning the ocean tug "Storm King" steamed swiftly down Stroudport Bay headed for Stone Horse Island and Codville. Aboard of her were the fathers of Val, Cal, and Sum, respectively; also Captain Bucklin, owner of the tug; Farleigh Hartwell, Cheney Killen, and Manager Culverson.

The City Marshal had been advised of the facts in the case. He was to wire all coast points east and west to be on the lookout for the yacht "Spitfire," and any suspiciously acting steam-yacht.

It was very evident that Val and Cal were not at liberty to report their whereabouts, else some token would have been received ere this. Conjecture failed to furnish a satisfactory hypothesis on which to account for their disappearance, except that they

had been lured aboard the unknown yacht, and abducted. The party proposed to call in at every port of importance on the way to Stone Horse Island, and make inquiries, as well as keep a sharp lookout for anything unusual or suspicious *en route*.

And so, with minds burdened with deep anxiety and perplexity, they saw the islands of the bay grow dim behind them as the tug steamed onward to the search.

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN HOT HASTE AFTER JONES

SUMNER PARKER, dripping with perspiration, and almost overcome with mortification — for if he prided himself on anything, it was his personal appearance — was skulking in a clump of pines, hurling boyish anathemas at the dog that so persistently intruded on his seclusion, and wishing, oh, so earnestly, that the red-headed man would hurry along those clothes.

There came a hurried step outside; some one gave the dog a vigorous slap, and he departed yelping, with feelings deeply hurt; and then the boughs parted in front of Sum, and a face peered in.

Sumner was on the point of renewing his flight, when the newcomer spoke. It was the young man whom he had seen with the girl on the beach.

"Halloo, don't run, Kent Ransome," was the newcomer's rather astonishing greeting, as he pushed his way into the clump and extended his hand to Sumner. "I've been expecting you to arrive for two days. You are late, but I'm mighty glad to see you just the same. Let me introduce myself as James, otherwise Jim Hilton, very much at your service."

"Oh," gasped Sumner, not fully comprehending

what the stranger was saying, but mechanically returning the handshake. "I thought it might be that girl, you know."

"That's my sister Madge. She's on the beach. Don't worry about her. But I say," went on Hilton, shaking Sum's hand heartily again, "I *am* awfully glad to see you, even if you didn't get here on schedule time. Why weren't you sooner?"

Sumner, having recovered from his embarrassment somewhat, gazed at Jim Hilton in perplexity.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded abruptly. "As for getting here on schedule time, as you call it, if I'd had my own way about it, I never would have arrived at all."

"I knew it; I knew it!" exclaimed Hilton, clapping Sumner excitedly on the back. "Splendid! Elegant! You are the very man." And he looked as though he wanted to dance a jig, so enthusiastic was he.

Sumner gazed at his companion as though he was looking upon a maniac.

"Look here," said he, suspiciously, "I believe you're half crazy. Who do you take me for, anyhow? I'm not your man. My name is Sumner Parker, and I'm from Stroudport. Never heard of Kent Ransome before in my life."

"Your name isn't Kent Ransome?" queried Jim Hilton, in a disappointed tone.

"Not much," retorted Sum, shortly, for he could make nothing of this conversation. "But if you

want to help me out, Mr. Hilton, if you want to give me a great big boost, you'll just tell my valet to hurry up with my wardrobe."

"Your what?" exclaimed Hilton, now mystified in turn.

"My valet. I had just engaged him when you and your sister came along. He's a short, red-headed man, with blue glasses, and a red and white blazer, and ——"

"Where is he?" demanded Jim Hilton. "I know him. He's the Cheerful Lunatic."

"The which?"

"Sis and I call him the Cheerful Lunatic," explained Jim, laughing. "His name is Professor J. Lowton Strodder, though what he is professor of, goodness only knows. He's a bright man, but eccentric; terrifically eccentric. Where is he?"

"I should say Cheerful Lunatic was a good name for him," returned Sum. "He was going to bring me some clothes down by the cow-pasture fence, near the rowboat."

"I'll go after him," said Hilton. "Wait here till I come back."

He was off like a flash.

"Did he think I would go wandering 'round the country, I wonder?" mused Sumner, laughing to himself, for the prospect of clothes made him feel more cheerful. "The folks in this place are funny things; here's two freaks discovered already. I wonder if the girl is like the others?"

Before Sumner had time to muse long, Jim Hilton came in sight on the beach, hurrying along the man who had been designated as Professor Strodder, or the "Cheerful Lunatic."

Each had some clothes in his arms, and Jim Hilton was dangling a pair of shoes. They soon reached the pine clump, and Hilton plunged at once into Sum's retreat, while the Professor hovered about outside.

"I hope you'll excuse my everlasting stupidity," was Hilton's first exclamation, "to keep you talking when you wanted clothes so badly, and half starved, too."

As he talked, Sumner seized the clothing. Stripping off his wet underwear, he hurriedly began attiring himself in the garments Hilton offered him.

"And then, you see," Jim Hilton went on, "I didn't know just how you were going to arrive, or I'd have been ready for you. I don't think, after all, that it makes any difference if your name is Sumner Parker, instead of Kent Ransome. The Professor doesn't seem to think it will ——"

"That's a comfort, anyhow," was Sumner's retort, in mild irony.

"So we won't talk about the matter any more now," continued Hilton, decisively, "but try to make you comfortable."

"Very kind of you," Sumner managed to say, as he worked away making himself presentable.

The clothing evidently belonged to the Professor.

Luckily that person was about Sum's height; but there was a decided difference in build — Sumner being quite fleshy, while the Professor was as slim as a lath. So the trousers, shirt, and coat fitted, as Parker laughingly remarked, "like the fly to the molasses."

Dry stockings, a pair of tennis shoes just his size, and a yachting cap, completed the toilet. Sum wrung out his wet nether garments, and stepped out of the thicket, feeling once more ready to face the world. He almost ran into the arms of Professor Strodder, who greeted him with a hearty handshake, but made no remark. The trio took their way along the beach toward the rowboat; and then it suddenly occurred to Sumner that he had a mission to perform outside of securing his personal safety and comfort.

"Say," he exclaimed, pausing abruptly. "Where am I, and where's the sheriff?"

The Professor had lost himself in a fit of deep abstraction; but Hilton turned with an exclamation of surprise.

"A sheriff? What do you want of a sheriff?"

Without waiting for Sumner to reply, he rattled on hurriedly:—

"Perhaps there's one in town, though; Padgett can tell you. This is Cod Island; and at the present minute you are about two miles from the village of Codville, and about twenty-five miles from mainland."

"How do you get to the mainland?" was Sum's anxious query, when he learned this unsatisfactory state of affairs.

"There's a sailing packet twice a week; she left this morning. You can't get off on her before next Monday," was the unwelcome reply.

"But I *must* do something," Sumner declared energetically. "Do you see that island over there?" He indicated the place where the "Spitfire" had gone ashore.

"That's Buckhorn Island," returned Jim Hilton, following the direction of Sumner's outstretched arm. "What of it?"

The Professor was still plunged in meditation, and paid no heed to the conversation.

"What of it?" retorted Sumner. "Just this of it. There's one of the stunningest yachts ashore on that island. She was stolen from Stroudport Bay, Wednesday morning, with me aboard; we were blown out to sea in the storm, and finally driven ashore there. I got away from the robber, Jones, this morning, and came here, and now I want a sheriff to arrest the thief and help me get the yacht back."

Jim Hilton stopped in his walk and grasped Sumner excitedly by the shoulder.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because I didn't have a chance," retorted Sum. "You didn't even ask me how I happened to come ashore here, nor where I came from."

"Why," responded Jim, in surprise, "we knew all that, of course."

"You knew?" gasped Sum. "How'd you know?"

"Oh, never mind now," Jim said hurriedly. "You must come right up to Padgett's with me. Sis and the Professor and I board at Padgett's, you know," he explained. "Padgett can tell what to do about this business, and we'll get a square meal inside of you."

It took no urging to make Sumner agree to this move. The Professor said he wished to stay on the beach, so leaving him behind, they hurried forward.

Leander Padgett's house stood some three or four hundred yards back from the sea wall. A grove of pines partly screened it from the sea, and before it ran what was presumably the highway, though it was little more than a path of sand mixed with clam shells and sawdust. The house was a comfortable-looking dwelling, with an ell, and a good shed at the back. Beyond this was a large garden, at the extremity of which appeared the figure of a man.

"There's Padgett," said Jim. "We'll go right over."

Mr. Padgett proved to be a kind-hearted, pleasant fisherman-farmer. He greeted Sumner cordially, and listened sympathetically to the story which he, with interjections from Jim, related.

"Stole the yacht, did he, an' you too?" he finally exclaimed. "Wal, sich actions are ruther *tew* stiff fer my blood. The ery of pirates hez gone by. An'

you wuz driv' ashore on Buckhorn Island last night, wuz you?" he went on. "What time?"

"About ten o'clock," Sumner answered.

Mr. Padgett wrinkled his brows as he spent a moment in calculation.

"You must hev gone ashore nigh on to high tide, ez I figger it," he finally said. "So 't'll be high tide agin 'bout 'leven."

"It's nine now," announced Jim, after consulting his watch.

"Jes' so," returned Padgett, "an' do you reckon," he went on earnestly, addressing Sumner, "do you reckon your craft would float at high tide?"

When this question was propounded Sumner's face took on a deeper shade of anxiety; for, to tell the truth, so immovable had the "Spitfire" seemed in her sandy berth, that the possibility of the tide lifting hêr, and enabling Jones to sail away, had not presented itself to him.

"Great Cæsar!" he exclaimed. "I forgot all about the tide. But, I say," he went on, "the 'Spitfire' was stuck hard ——"

"So's lots of craft, but the tide lifts 'em," returned Padgett, sententiously. "We hain't got time to get a warrant issued, much less to find an officer to sarve it; an' all is, we've got to hyper over to Buckhorn Island an' sail intew that Jones before he can git away. Come to the house an' git some fodder, an' we'll start, drat my biskits ef we don't."

Leander Padgett gave a squint at the sun, shoul-

dered his hoe, and started for the house, followed by Jim and Sumner.

"What did I tell you?" said Jim. "I tell you Padgett is the man to get you out of the scrape."

The next quarter of an hour was a trying one for Sumner, since he had to undergo Madge Hilton's bright, though sympathetic glances. Though she did her best to give Sumner no cause for embarrassment, it was impossible to prevent a sparkle of mirth showing in her eyes occasionally as she recalled the ridiculous figure he had cut on the beach; and Sumner, realizing it even more keenly, reddened more and more at the recollection, until, as he afterward said, he felt as though he had been in a tub of hot water for a week.

But this trying time was greatly mitigated by the substantial repast which kindly Mrs. Padgett set before him; and when Mr. Padgett announced himself as ready for the affray, Sumner's inner man was much refreshed.

It was fully half-past nine when the party reached the beach, accompanied by Miss Madge and Mrs. Padgett, both of whom were as interested and excited as any of the party.

The tender was safe, since the boys had taken the precaution to pull her out of reach of the rising tide; but inasmuch as the surf was high, it was decided to make use of Padgett's big dory for the trip, since it had two pairs of oars, and was a capital surf boat; as, in fact, dories are from the nature of their construction.

Padgett had his shotgun and a revolver of the pattern known as "bulldog" and Jim had a light Marlin rifle, all in anticipation of emergencies. The revolver Padgett gave into Sumner's hands, and altogether they presented quite a warlike appearance as they filed down on the beach.

"You'd better let me go along to fire the rifle," coaxed Madge, though the laugh in her eyes belied the tenor of her words. "I can fire it straighter than Jim, anyhow. I'd put a little hole through that horrid man just as nice."

"Listen to that for bloodthirstiness," ejaculated Mrs. Padgett, laughing in spite of her apprehension.

"P'raps we *hed* better take you 'long, and leave Jim to dream some more dreams," said Padgett, slyly.

Whatever this sally might mean, it had the effect of making Jim redden.

"Oh, go 'way with you!" he exclaimed impatiently. "We shan't get there to-day if you stop to talk."

The trio got through the surf without accident, and pulled away lustily, leaving Madge and Mrs. Padgett on the beach gazing after, and occasionally waving a handkerchief.

They were halfway to the island, when Jim, who was in the stern, shaded his eyes, and gazed fixedly at the island ahead.

"Is that the yacht's mast I see over the ridge?" he asked finally.

"Like's not," said Padgett, pausing in his rowing,

and turning to look. "That ridge hain't very high. But you've got better eyes than me, if you can see her mast so fur as this."

"I see it, too," exclaimed Sumner, presently, "and — I —believe — yes, sir, — it's moving!"

"'Tain't possible," exclaimed Padgett, incredulously, though with considerable excitement in his voice. "'Tain't high tide fur an hour yit."

"It's a fact, just the same," corroborated Jim. "The mast seems to be swaying back and forth as though the yacht was tossing on a swell. And, by cracky!" he went on excitedly, "her mainsail's going up."

At this unwelcome information efforts at the oars were redoubled, for it appeared that Mr. Padgett's tidal calculations were at fault, or else Sumner was mistaken regarding the time the yacht went ashore and the condition of her sandy berth. As they approached the island more closely, the gyrations of the mast, and the tip of white which must be the peak of the mainsail, were more plainly visible, until they rowed close inshore, and the ridge of land loomed up and cut off the view.

"Ef 'twan't so fur, our best holt would be to row 'round the island and head 'im off; but we hain't got time," said Padgett, as the dory came close inshore. "We must land right here, scoot over the ridge, and try to ketch the rascal before he can work the yacht out of the cove."

The dory drove smartly ashore almost at the spot

where Sumner had left the island earlier in the day. To his joy, he found his effects unmolested in their hiding-place; but there was no time to change clothes now. Hastily drawing the dory out of reach of the water, they stole as quietly as possible up the rough slope, in single file; Padgett ahead with the shot-gun, Sumner next with revolver in hand, and Jim guarding the rear, with the rifle.

They did not think it probable that Jones knew of their arrival, for not a sign of him had been seen, and an easy victory was counted upon, provided he had not yet been able to get the "Spitfire" out of the cove, or, at least, so well under way that it would be impossible to stop him.

A moment later the trio gained the summit of the ridge, and looked anxiously down. The "Spitfire," with jib and mainsail set, was leisurely moving along, headed for the narrow opening in the reef. The wind was from the west, which was fair to take her through. Jones, at the tiller, was looking neither to the right nor left, but kept his gaze steadily on the narrow opening through which the yacht must pass to reach the open sea, and his back was almost squarely turned toward his unexpected visitors.

"Hold up!" screamed Padgett, instantly plunging down the slope toward the cove. "Luff her, luff her, I say, or I'll plunk your measly hide full o' buckshot."

Sumner and Jim Hilton ran hotly after their

leader, and shouted threateningly as they went; but neither of them could have told a minute later what they had said.

For one astonished instant Jones looked around, and beheld the trio charging down the hillside. Another hundred feet and he would be through the gap. Every foot of progress took him more and more out of the lee of the island, and gave the wind a better chance at the sails. He gave one sharp look ahead — the yacht was heading dead for the opening in the reef — then dropped out of sight behind the washboard, leaving nothing visible save a hand on the tiller.

It was an exciting moment for all concerned. The three pursuers, having reached the water's edge, raced along the cove shore, striving to get abreast of the yacht before she reached the outlet.

"'Tain't no use," groaned Padgett, presently, stopping short and puffing vehemently. "Oh, wouldn't I like to fill him chock-full of lead. But what can ye do?"

"Try for his hand!" exclaimed Sumner, excitedly.

A moment later there rang out a report that was the combined utterance of rifle, revolver, and shotgun. The stern of the "Spitfire" was smartly peppered, and Jones' hand suddenly dropped from sight. But the tiller, held by the comb, did not shift. The yacht, gathering headway every moment, dashed on like a bird. Straight through the gap she sped, with never a bump or grind. When she had reached

a distance of several hundred yards offshore, Jones, deeming himself safe, rose to view and shook a fist at the group he was leaving behind.

"Drat my biskits!" exclaimed Padgett, in great wrath. "Wouldn't I jest enjoy punching that feller's head!"

Jim said nothing, but looked extremely vexed, while Sumner stamped his foot in a paroxysm of indignation.

CHAPTER XXXV

AN ATTEMPT AT RECAPTURE

To say that Sumner Parker was disappointed at the failure of the expedition to capture Jones and retake the "Spitfire," is to measure too lightly the feelings that overpowered him as he watched the yacht sailing away from the island, and though neither of his companions had any personal interest at stake, yet their faces expressed a depth of sympathetic indignation completely in accord with his own emotions.

"Dumb it all!" ejaculated Padgett, finally, abruptly turning his back on the yacht. "He's euchred us this time, an' we hain't got no show fer to help ourselves. We might's well go back hum; 'twon't do no good to stand here all day gazin' after him. That won't bring him back, nor the bo't, neither."

There was common sense in this remark, and the trio made its way back to the dory. After pausing until Sumner had resumed his own clothing and secured the camera, they embarked and pulled leisurely for Codville.

The "Spitfire" had gone off to the southward, and the occupants of the dory could see her plainly two or three miles distant, standing off and on, as though Jones was undecided what course to pursue.

"I wish to goodness there'd come a flat calm," said Sumner, presently, after watching the maneuvers of the yacht for some minutes. "Then we might row after him, and catch the yacht after all."

"That's so," assented Padgett. "It's a pity we can't boss the wind 'round to suit us; but we can't, an' it don't look much like a calm this day."

The old man cast a weather-wise eye at the sky. The wind was coming briskly out of the west, and nothing seemed to indicate any cessation of its force.

"I suppose it's no go, anyhow, and I must make the best of it," said Sumner, disconsolately. "I don't care so much for myself, for I can get home somehow; but there's the 'Spitfire' — she doesn't belong to me. I feel responsible for her, for I was in charge of her when she was stolen."

"Wal," returned Padgett, reassuringly, "there hain't but one thing you kin do, and the Lord knows we ain't called on to perform no impossibilities. You sent a message hum by the pigeon, an' prob'ly by now your folks have got it and are hyperin' 'round to come fer ye. They'll likely send dispatches all along the coast for the officers to keep an eye out for the stolen yacht. This coast hain't so big but one kin get on track of a stolen bo't without much trouble, 'specially such a craft as yourn.

"You see," he went on, "Jones'd have to dodge 'round a pile to keep some one from findin' him, an'

once known such a bo't has been stole, fust time she turns up she's bound to be reported. The fellow has got to go ashore sometime. He can't sail 'round forever.

"As I said before, there hain't but one thing you kin do, an' that is to stay right with us till the next packet, which is Monday. That'll get you to Cross Harbor, where you'll strike railroad and telegraft, an' then you'll be all hunky."

"Why can't I reach mainland without waiting for the packet?" inquired Sumner, anxiously.

"'Cause you'd have to row thirty miles in a small bo't to do it," replied Padgett, promptly. "An' I won't allow you to do that. All the smacks has gone fishin', or there might be a way to git ye up without waitin'. I jest wish Bob Small was here with his 'Katie,' we'd give that scamp a hot chase, an' stand a chance of ketchin' him, too; though your bo't is a speedy craft — she showed too much speed for us, anyhow."

"Well," sighed Sumner, "I suppose I'll have to wait for the packet; but you must give me something to do to earn my board while I stay, for I've got just a quarter in my clothes. All the rest of my money is on the 'Spitfire.'"

"The idee," was the rejoinder. "I shan't take a cent."

"Yes, you will," retorted the cook of the "Spitfire," decidedly, "or I shall have to find a place where I can earn it. I shan't impose myself on any one."

"Guess you do' know what kind of folks we are down here," chuckled the old man. "Wy, we never know when a shipwrecked crew's a-goin' to turn up an' eat us out of house an' hum. But if you do reely feel that way, I've got some paint up to the house, an' I've been cal'latin' to touch up the place soon's I could. Can you spread paint?"

"I can try hard," said Sumner.

"Then it's a bargain. We'll get at the paintin' te-morrer mornin'."

It was a hungry crowd that landed on Cod Island soon after Sumner made his bargain with Padgett, nor were their spirits as light by several degrees as when they started. It was apparent, however, to Sumner that Mr. Padgett's view of the situation was correct, and he felt compelled to follow the old man's advice. The carriers would no doubt do their work well, and Captain Bucklin was on the lookout for them; so his parents and Val and Cal would know soon where the yacht was. On Monday he could get away himself, and do his share in recapturing the "Spitfire." Having reached this conclusion, he resolutely tried to put his disappointment out of mind.

After an extremely good dinner Mr. Padgett, Sumner, and Jim walked over to Codville to notify the authorities regarding the theft of the yacht. They saw nothing of the "Spitfire," although they followed the shore the entire distance, and kept a keen watch.

Sumner found Codville to be a typical fishing vil-

lage, situated at the head of a snug harbor on the south end of the island. Lobster pots, drying nets, and split fish curing in the open air were everywhere in evidence.

Most of the men being away fishing, the village wore something of a deserted look, but the proprietor of the single store — where a general stock of wonderful proportions was kept — was at his place of business. In addition to being first selectman of the town, this individual, 'Squire Muggins, was also town clerk and treasurer, justice of the peace and a trial justice as well, besides being postmaster; but despite his numerous official duties, he still found time for personal affairs, and when the trio entered the store they found the 'Squire asleep on the back counter.

He was made acquainted with the robbery of the yacht, and as well as he could Sumner described Jones to him. A warrant for the arrest of Jones was made out, which the 'Squire agreed to place in the hands of Constable Bodkin immediately upon that officer's return from Jonesboro on the morrow. Likewise he promised to tell every one he saw about the matter — which promise he no doubt kept, since news was scarce in Codville, and every scrid of it was treasured up and told and retold until it became completely worn out.

"Say, Sumner," asked Jim Hilton, in a guarded undertone, "do you believe in dreams?"

It was forenoon of the next day. Mr. Padgett, before going offshore to underrun his trawl, had rigged a swinging stage across the front of the Padgett domicile; and on this, some twenty feet above the ground, and connected thereto by a ladder, stood Sumner Parker, industriously plying a paint brush, while Jim Hilton, who had volunteered to assist, worked beside him.

It was a bright, clear morning. From their position a good view of the sea to the eastward was obtainable, including the island where Sumner had been driven ashore, and the others near it.

Padgett *père* had now gone off to his trawl, Mrs. Padgett was in the kitchen at the back of the house, and Miss Madge, after casually inquiring if the boys did not want her to come up and hold a sunshade over them, had taken possession of a hammock under the trees near by, where she was reading. The eccentric Professor Strodder strolled to and fro under the trees, meditating deeply, and occasionally jotting down the result of his cogitations in a note-book.

"Well," replied Sumner, eyeing critically a broad streak of paint that he had just laid on, "that depends on the dream. I know one that I believed in, especially at the time."

"What was it?" asked Jim, with considerable interest. This seemed to be a pet subject with him.

"Why, when I was about a dozen years old," said Sumner, "I was rummaging 'round for something to eat, and found a lot of lemon pies on a pantry

shelf. I hooked one, and poked it out the window and left it on the window ledge, intending to go 'round into the back yard and get it when nobody was looking. But mother sent me on an errand just then, and I forgot all about the pie.

"That night I dreamt the dog had eaten it up, and sure enough, when I went after it next morning, he was just finishing it. That's the only dream I ever had come true."

"Pshaw! That was easy ——" began Jim.

"Yes, for the dog," was Sum's facetious interruption.

"But I mean something different from that," resumed Jim, earnestly. "I mean a dream that is a dream; something tangible; something — well, I don't hardly know how to express what I mean, but ——"

"I never saw a tangible dream," returned Sum, with mock solemnity. "My kind were always as thin as air, and disappeared when I woke up."

"Of course," was Jim's impatient retort; "but you don't quite understand me yet. I haven't said anything to you about it before. I've been waiting to see if you knew about it yourself."

"About what?" demanded Sumner, somewhat mystified by his companion's peculiar air.

"But it's plain that you don't know anything about the matter, or you would have said so," Jim went on.

"Now don't you take it for granted that I tell every-

thing I know," retorted Sum, good-naturedly. "Tell me what you're driving at, and I'll tell you if I know anything about it."

"It is a dream that I dreamed three times," said Jim, with impressive earnestness, which, however, did not seem to have a great deal of effect on the volatile Sumner. "And it was about you."

"About me? Oh, get out!"

"Yes, sir," affirmed Jim, "about you. Part of it has come true already, and if it all comes true, as it will, it means thousands of dollars for each of us. I tell you the third time never fails."

"Whew, you don't say so!" Sumner cried, now thoroughly interested. "If you can dream me into a fortune, Jim Hilton," he went on, "I'll be your friend for life. Tell it, quick."

"Last Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday nights I dreamed that you came ashore in a small boat," began Jim, earnestly.

"Then why did you call me Kent Ransome?" demanded Sumner, beginning to understand the queer reception accorded him on the previous morning.

"Oh, well, I didn't dream very distinctly what your name was. I just had the impression that it was something of that sort. But you must be the fellow, for he was short and stout. Then I dreamed that on Friday night — that's to-night — we took your boat, and you and I and Professor Strodder ——"

"The blue-haired lunatic," interjected Sum, with a chuckle, for the Professor's immense blue glasses

and erratic movements excited his risibilities whenever they came to mind.

"He's a mighty smart man, if he is peculiar," affirmed Jim, stoutly, catching Sum's exclamation. "He believes in the dream. He's all ready to go with us."

"Well, go on."

"Friday night we took your boat and landed at midnight on Stone Horse Island —— "

"What island is that?"

"There it is," explained Jim, turning from his work to point out over the water. "That one just north of Buckhorn, where you went ashore. See that big rock on it? That's the stone horse."

Sumner saw, and remarked that he had taken a picture of it.

"We had a hen —— " began Jim.

"A hen?" exclaimed Sumner. "What for? to roast, or lay eggs for breakfast?"

"To scratch," was the laconic explanation.

"We landed, put the hen on the ground, and followed her as she led the way to the highest part of the island. There she began to scratch for all she was worth, and just then the moon came out from behind a cloud, and right across it were the words, 'Here lies Captain Kidd's treasure.'"

"And then?" asked Sum, who was interested, in spite of his incredulity.

"Then," said Jim, "I woke up."

"Of course, I might have known it," was his com-

panion's reply. "A fellow's never allowed to enjoy a fortune, even in his sleep. Well, what do you make of it, anyhow?"

"It's a dead sure thing," was Jim's earnest reply. "The third time never fails. The first part of the dream has come true. You have come ashore, in a small boat. There's nothing to hinder our taking the hen and going to Stone Horse Island to-night to carry out the rest of the dream. Will you do it?"

"Why, certainly, if it will be any accommodation, but I don't believe we'll find a thing. The idea," he laughed, "a hen to scratch up Kidd's treasure! Do you expect the words to write themselves across the moon, too?"

He glanced quizzically at Jim.

"Certainly not; we'll take a shovel along and dig where the hen scratches, and find the treasure there, instead."

"Well, I'll go along with you, and the Professor and — the hen," laughed Sumner.

"Then it's a bargain," announced Jim, grasping Sumner's disengaged hand heartily. "But not a word to the folks, for Sis would worry and Padgett would laugh. He knows more than is good for him already."

As Sumner completed this compact he glanced down to the ground, and beheld a familiar figure hurrying up the yard.

"I've caught you at last, you young scamp!" a well-known voice exclaimed, as its owner paused

beneath the staging. "Come down here, and don't waste time about it, either."

The newcomer was no less a person than Jones.

"By George!" muttered Sumner, in an undertone, "here's the fellow that stole the yacht, and he's after me. What shall I do?"

"I admire his gall," retorted Jim, loudly, turning in such haste that he nearly fell from the staging. "I guess he doesn't know there's a warrant out for his arrest," he added in a lower tone.

"Say, do you hear me?" called Jones, threateningly, coming to the foot of the ladder. "You come down here, and come mighty lively, my young duck, or somebody will get a hole in him."

Jones spoke with deep emphasis, and pulled his revolver into sight as he did so.

"Get in through the window," whispered Jim, breathlessly. "Run down and get Padgett's shotgun, or my rifle, and arrest the fellow, while I stay here and parley with him."

No sooner did the idea take lodgment in Sumner's excited head than he made a quick dive through an open window close at hand, and vanished from view.

The staging now shook under the hurried steps of Jones on the ladder, for he was coming in pursuit, and his face did not wear a pleased expression. Evidently he felt that he could terrorize the household as much as he pleased, and secure his object with little trouble; but he reckoned without his host.

A pail, three quarters full of bright yellow paint, found its way to the top of the ladder. A moment later it was inverted over the head of the ascending Jones, and quicker than it takes to tell it the yellow shower enveloped the burly ruffian from head to foot, and took the starch out of him as quickly as an electric shock would have done.

He fairly dropped from the ladder in his astonishment; and as he danced about in wrath on the ground below the stage, swearing like a trooper and endeavoring to wipe away the oily yellow liquid that ran in streams down his clothing, Jim Hilton gazed down in elation, and felt that the hand of retribution had begun to put in its work.

"I'll pay you dearly for this!" affirmed the enraged man, gritting his teeth, as he brushed away at the paint. He pocketed his revolver, that he might work with both hands, and was gathering a bunch of grass to assist in removing the paint, when a sharp command in a girlish voice demanded his attention.

"Go right away from this house!"

Miss Madge, surprised in the midst of her book by the arrival of Jones, had slipped into the house, secured Jim's rifle — which she could handle with as much accuracy as her brother — and appeared on the scene, determined to drive off the intruder. Her grit did her credit, but her girlish appearance did not make Jones' heart quail, and not till she had repeated her command did he take her at all seriously.

In some apprehension, he desisted from his cleaning operations at the second word of command, and then, — the front door burst open and Sumner appeared with Padgett's double-barreled shotgun leveled.

Before either Miss Madge or Sumner could anticipate his movement, Jones turned and ran swiftly out of the yard and down the road, dodging hither and thither to make aim difficult. In his flight he nearly upset the erratic Professor Strodder, who, hearing loud words, had wandered up and was looking on agape; and the ruffian quickly disappeared from view around a turn, closely followed by Tacks, who bounded after in pell-mell enthusiasm.

Jim descended from the staging, and the entire company, now supplemented by Mrs. Padgett, laughed long and loudly at the mishap that had befallen Jones, and at his singular yellow appearance as he departed. The only thing to dim the mirth was the fact that the attempt at capture had failed.

"Come, Jim," said Sumner, presently awaking to the exigencies of the occasion, "we must follow him up. He's got the 'Spitfire' somewhere 'round, and if we move lively, we may be able to get hold of her."

Jim was as eager for the affray as his companion, and taking the rifle and shotgun, they ran off in the direction Jones had taken, followed by admonitions from those who remained behind.

About fifteen minutes after Jones' disappearance from the Padgett domicile, a singular looking individual, followed by all the youngsters and dogs in the village, entered the general store of 'Squire Muggins at Codville, and breathlessly inquired if he kept turpentine.

The 'Squire eyed his would-be customer from head to toe, and grinned.

"What ye want it fer?" he hazarded facetiously. "To thin ye out? Hed a paint shower up your way, hain't ye?"

"Had an accident," vouchsafed the man, gruffly, in a tone that warned fun-makers to beware.

The 'Squire led the way to the back store, and here the paint-besmeared Jones spent some minutes in cleaning up his person as best he could with the means at hand. Emerging at length into the main store, he was confronted by two dusty youths who entered at that moment by the front door.

"Catch him, 'Squire," called the foremost, who happened to be Jim, pointing at the figure of Jones framed in the rear doorway. "That's the man who stole the yacht."

At this unexpected declaration 'Squire Muggins jumped a foot, but Jones jumped farther. Without ceremony, without waiting to pay for the turpentine he had used in cleaning off the paint, he turned and bolted out the back way. After him went the 'Squire, followed by Jim, Sumner, and a long and straggling procession of youngsters and dogs, which had been

waiting in front of the store for Jones to emerge, and which now, under the stimulus of great excitement, lost their awe of the storekeeper and streamed inside.

Jones led the way, and such a way. In the rear of the store was a large yard, well filled with boxes, barrels, crates, and all sorts of odds and ends, over which the ruffian vaulted as though running a hurdle race. The 'Squire, who was no light-weight, and somewhat stiff and rheumatic, became mired — so to speak — in the midst of this collection, and so did the bulk of the youngsters composing the procession, but Jim and Sum climbed over all obstructions, as also did a few of Codville's youthful population, and all the dogs; and presently the aggregation was going at full tilt through the woods that came up to the 'Squire's back fence, while the 'Squire himself climbed upon a box for a better view, and shouted encouragement to the pursuers.

For some hundred yards Jones' course was easy to follow. Then woods and underbrush thickened, and his form was lost to view, nor was the noise of his progress audible when they paused to listen, as was frequently done, for the dogs and youngsters made a great rumpus as they ran hither and thither.

The pursuit soon became a matter of guesswork and conjecture. When at last Sum and Jim emerged on the shore of a cove fully half a mile from Codville — having distanced all the youngsters — they found that they in turn had been outdone. The "Spitfire,"

which Jones had apparently run as closely inshore as he dared before coming ashore, was standing out with mainsail loosely set, as though hoisted in a great hurry. Of Jones nothing was visible save a hand on the tiller.

"Stumped again," groaned Sumner, in deep disgust.

Jim said nothing, but looked indignant volumes as he labored to regain his breath; while half a dozen curs of various colors and sizes pranced about at the water's edge, and barked lustily.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A HUNT FOR TREASURE

"SH-SH — don't make so much noise."

Two persons were standing in the doorway of Mr. Padgett's henhouse, and a third was evidently inside, for sundry protesting voices sounded among the feathered residents. The time was about ten-thirty o'clock, Friday night.

"Cut — cut — cut — cackle — cackle — squawk — squawk!"

"For goodness' sake, Jim, go easy there," remonstrated Sumner. "You'll wake everybody up."

"I fear me much, my young friend," added the other outsider, as he peered into the henhouse, "that this unseemly outcry will disturb the slumbers of the household."

There was a remark from Jim inside that sounded a good deal like "Hang the household!" but it was lost in the excitement.

The hen was presently secured, and her remonstrances muffled by placing her in a meal bag. The trio left the henhouse, and screening themselves from chance observation from the house, reached the beach unmolested, not even the suspicions of Tacks being aroused.

The moon was unobscured, so there was little difficulty encountered in getting the tender into the water, and out through the surf. Presently the company was afloat, and rowing eastward; for this was the expedition formed to go to Stone Horse Island and search for Captain Kidd's treasure, in accordance with Jim Hilton's thrice-dreamt dream.

After the unsuccessful outcome of their pursuit of Jones, nothing more had been seen or heard of that individual. Painting had been resumed, and carried on uninterruptedly for the remainder of the day; and though Sumner looked on this escapade as no end of a lark, and Jim regarded it as a bona fide search for fortune, yet the excitement of the moment could not wholly suffice to drive away the drowsiness that beset them, and forced them to admit they were tired.

As for the Professor, he had not wielded a paint-brush all day, and was as fresh as a June morning. He sat in the stern while the boys each pulled an oar, and quoted verses to the moon, shining full in his face, apparently oblivious of the fact that he was a treasure seeker.

"I hope he'll use his share of the boodle to get those whiskers shaved off," whispered Sumner, irreverently, as he noticed the rapt expression on the Professor's face, which was rendered grotesque by the rough fringe of hair about his chin.

"No," returned Jim, with a chuckle, "he's going to found an orphan asylum for red-headed babies."

"My young friends," interposed the Professor, who was not in so deep a revery as his companions had supposed, "I shall neither shave off my whiskers nor found an orphan asylum for red-headed babies with my portion of the treasure which we are about to obtain.

"I shall devote my portion to the development of the Strodderian Idea, the Inexplicability of Taste and Smell," went on the Professor, with deep gravity, his temper unruffled by the remarks of his companions.

"Stand from under," whispered Jim. "The Professor is going to ride his hobby."

"For instance," continued Professor Strodder, warming up to his subject, "do you know how oyster stew tastes?"

The boys replied in the affirmative.

"How do you know?"

"Because we have eaten it," was the reply.

"Ah, there's just the point," was the triumphant response. "You know the taste because you have tasted it; but the time will come when it will be possible for you to know accurately the taste and smell of things unknown to you simply by descriptive words.

"When," the Professor continued, "I have evolved a phrase which shall exactly describe the distinctive taste and smell of oyster stew, in terms a baby might fathom, the world will receive an invaluable boon, and I undying fame."

"Here we are," announced Sumner, at this juncture, shutting off Professor Strodder from any further performance on his hobby. Stone Horse Island loomed up directly ahead, the huge mass of stone that resembled a horse rising darkly against the sky.

"We mustn't land till nearly twelve," announced Jim, authoritatively, as he pulled out his watch. "But it's quarter of now," he added, "so we might as well go ashore."

The landing was made on a pebbly beach without further ado. Nothing had been brought but the hen in the meal bag and a shovel. The moon, fast nearing the full, looked down serenely on the island and the heaving sea. Now that the moment had come to put the dream to a test, every one felt excited and nervous — Jim excited at the prospect of a fortune almost in his grasp; the Professor elated that soon he should have the means to develop to the uttermost his "Strodderian Idea"; while Sumner, though pooh-poohing in his heart the whole undertaking, could not fail to be infected by the enthusiasm of his companions, or influenced by the uncanniness of the hour.

Sumner landed first. There was no surf worth mentioning on that side of the island, so the boat was run easily up on the shingle, and he stepped almost directly upon dry land. Next came Jim with the bag; then the Professor with the shovel.

And now arrived the grand moment for releasing

the hen. Cautiously Jim untied the string from the mouth of the bag. He shook the bag gently. The hen refused to appear.

"Come out of there, old lady," he exclaimed, inverting the bag.

And the "old lady" did come out. Plump on the sand fell the hen, toppling over on her side from drowsiness, but quickly recovering her equilibrium. She gazed about for a few moments in wild-eyed wonder, while the three treasure seekers waited breathlessly for her to start.

"At last," muttered Jim, in a whisper, as though a loud word might break a charm, "this is the moment of which I have dreamed."

"Isn't she ever going to start?" queried Sumner, after a full minute had passed, and the hen had not stirred from her position. "It'll be twelve o'clock before she locates the place if she doesn't get a gait on soon."

He now spoke as though he fully believed the dream would be fulfilled.

But now the hen started. Professor Strodder, dim of vision, had pressed forward too closely in his eagerness to watch her movements. He stumbled and fell, and in another moment would have flattened the hen beneath him, had not the creature seized that instant for her departure.

Thoroughly aroused, and frightened nearly out of her feeble wits, the hen gave a loud "cackle — cackle — squawk — squawk —squawk," and half

ran, half flew up the island slope, vanishing in the dimness before the startled treasure seekers fully realized she had started.

"Follow her up! Follow her up!" said Jim, excitedly; but his admonitions were needless, for both Sumner and the Professor were using their best endeavors to overtake the fowl.

But at the end of ten minutes the trio had traversed the island pretty thoroughly without discovering a sign of the missing hen; Sumner, who had again lost faith in the expedition, and once more regarded it as a huge joke, now and then going into peals of laughter at the absurdity of the situation and the glimpses he obtained of Professor Strodder's canvas-clothed legs performing miraculous antics in the moonlight, as their owner eagerly attempted to bring the search to a successful issue.

"Well, what are you going to do?" asked Sumner, when they all presently met on the moonlit side of the stone horse. "It's twelve now."

"Don't tell me that," retorted Jim, ungraciously, and in a thoroughly disgusted tone. "If Professor Strodder had only minded his business, and not fallen down on the hen, we might be somewhere by this time. I'll bet you," he continued earnestly, "that old hen is squatting now exactly on the place where the treasure is buried; but she was scared and went so darned quick that we couldn't keep up with her."

"You must pardon the infirmities of age," the

Professor said gently. "My eyesight is but poor, and my footing not the best. But remember, my young friend, that had I not fallen, the hen might not have started at all."

"Do you propose to hunt farther, or go home?" asked Sumner, who began to think the joke had gone far enough.

"We might as well go, I suppose," Jim admitted in a crestfallen voice, "but let's make just one more good search before we do so. Let's go back to the boat and start from there again."

This proposition being acceded to, the trio returned to the water's edge.

"Didn't we come ashore here?" Jim asked, looking about vainly for the tender in the uncertain light, for the moon had gone under a cloud.

"So we did. Here's our tracks," said Sumner. "But where in the world is the boat?"

"Great Scott, it's gone!" And such was the fact.

It now occurred to them that in the excitement of disembarking and the beginning of the hunt for treasure they had totally forgotten to secure the tender, it having been left just as it grounded. The rising tide had borne it away, and a careful scrutiny of the sea showed it drifting toward Cod Island, some distance from shore.

"What a set of double digested idiots we are!" exclaimed Jim, in disgust.

"Maybe so," was Sumner's response. "Anyhow, we're bound to stay here all night, all right."

"Impossible to stay here all night," spoke up the Professor, decidedly. "Why, my young friends, my limbs are already shivering with the chill that pierces my habiliments," and his teeth fairly chattered as he talked. A chill wind from off the water, which in the excitement of the pursuit had not been noticed, penetrated their light clothing keenly now that their blood was beginning to cool.

"You're bound to stay here, unless you swim for it," was Jim's rather curt retort. "If you had only tied the boat," he went on, "for you were the last one out of her, we wouldn't have been caught in this scrape."

Which remark goes to show that when one makes a failure of a cherished project, he is quick to seek some one or something else on which to fasten the blame.

For the balance of the night the three treasure seekers huddled about a driftwood fire, which after some effort they coaxed to burn in the lee of the stone horse; and presently all fell asleep under the influence of the grateful warmth.

Brightly the sun shone the next morning when the three regained consciousness. They awoke almost simultaneously, and the first thing they heard was the loud cackling of a hen.

"Cut-cut-cut-cut-cudahcut! Cut-cut-cut-cut-cud-ahcut!"

The sound appeared to come from the other side of the big boulder.

"Crickets!" exclaimed Sumner, when he had

waked sufficiently to take in the situation. "Now we don't want her, that old hen has bobbed up as serenely as you please."

"Go shy a stone at her," Jim sleepily rejoined. "I'm not half slept up yet."

Sumner walked around the stone horse. The hen was strutting to and fro on the other side, cackling vigorously. A moment later Sumner returned to his companions.

"What do you think?" he cried. "That ridiculous hen has actually laid an egg."

"Where?" Jim started up, his sleepiness dissipated.

"Right on the other side of this rock."

"Just as I expected." This unlooked-for remark came from the Professor, who now arose to his feet, rubbing his eyes. "My young friends, I too have had a dream."

"Oh, go on," was Sumner's rather ungracious response.

"Out with it," demanded Jim.

"I dreamed that the hen had laid an egg," the Professor announced, with due impressiveness. "We dug at the spot where the egg was laid and found the treasure."

At this announcement all hurried around the rock to view the hen and the scene of her industry. The grass grew close up to the side of the boulder, and there in a snug nook lay the egg, while its producer strutted proudly about near by.

The Professor brought the shovel around with him, for he, at least, had confidence in his dream. Having laid the egg aside, he vigorously attacked the sod; and as he worked, his companions, eager in spite of themselves, watched closely. When at length Professor Strodder, perspiring freely from the unwonted exercise, was forced to desist, Jim was ready to take the shovel; and finally Sumner took his turn at the excavation.

At the end of half an hour's hard work, during which time a hole had been cut through the stout grass roots, and perhaps three feet into the sand beneath, the shovel struck a hard substance.

"I've hit something," announced Sumner, breathlessly.

A few more strokes revealed a small iron-bound keg.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

"I TOLD you so," remarked Professor Strodder, with a trace of excitement in his usually impassive tones.

The keg had been pulled from its resting-place in the sand, and Jim was now eagerly attacking it with the shovel.

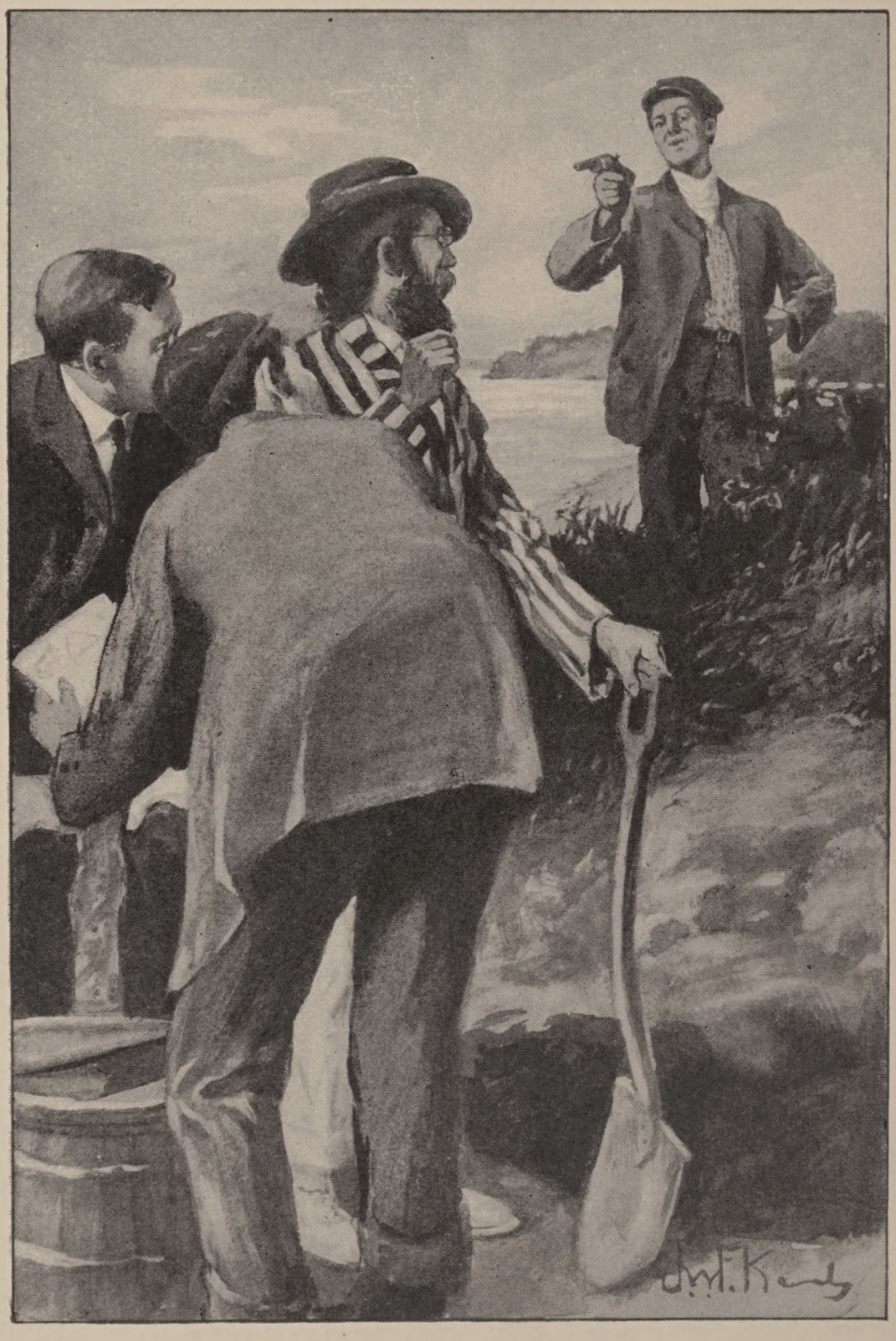
"Mighty light weight for a treasure keg, I call it," said Sumner, dubiously. "Though perhaps it's stuffed with greenbacks," he added facetiously.

"Fudge!" Jim rejoined, "guess they didn't have greenbacks in Kidd's time, did they?"

"If so," interposed the Professor, with an air of profound learning, "I fear they would not be legal tender now."

The shovel presently crushed in the top of the keg, and every one knelt down to look inside.

There was no heap of tarnished silver, and glittering gold, stamped with strange characters of an ancient mintage. In fact, at first there did not appear to be anything in the keg; but Jim finally brought out a small metal box, or can, about six inches long, and perhaps three in diameter, securely sealed up. It was, as the reader will recognize, the



"'I'VE GOT YOU, THE WHOLE CROWD OF YOU. BY JING, THIS IS MY INNINGS!'"

exact counterpart of the can Val Brandon had found on Tower Island.

"Our fortune grows smaller," said Sumner, with a brief laugh.

A few blows of the shovel forced the can open, and from its interior Jim drew a sheet of parchment, covered with odd characters. At the top was the figure of a triangle, and at each of its corners respectively, was drawn a horse, a tower, and a fish, as in the one Val had found. The characters beneath this figure were similar in their appearance to those on Val's find.

"I'll bet a thousand dollars this is the key to the treasure!" exclaimed Jim, trembling with excitement, as he passed the parchment to Sumner for his scrutiny. The Professor crowded up eagerly to gaze over Sum's shoulder, but vouchsafed no opinion, despite his elation. *His* dream, at any rate, had amounted to something.

"I've got you, the whole crowd of you. By jing, this is *my* innings!"

This unexpected remark, uttered in a loud tone close at hand, caused the three treasure seekers to turn instantly. Jones was standing a few paces distant, holding a leveled revolver in his hand. Behind him, a little offshore, was the "Spitfire" at anchor, and on the beach below was the tender, which he had very evidently picked up.

"To avoid complications, you might as well hold up the sky for a few minutes," continued the ruf-

fian, thoroughly enjoying the consternation he was causing.

"What does this unseemly conduct mean?" inquired the Professor, in some trepidation, uncertain as to the meaning of Jones' order.

"It means hold up your hands, you red-headed popogee," retorted Jones, gruffly. "And you, Parker, hand over that paper you've got in your hands. I want *you*."

Sumner had been endeavoring to sly the parchment into his pocket, but was unable to elude the watchfulness of the newcomer. He saw the uselessness of resistance, and grudgingly complied. Jones glanced curiously at the characters on the parchment, and thrust it hastily into a pocket.

"What are you going to do with us?" queried the Professor, when the parchment had been passed over, amid the smothered execrations of all three of the prisoners. Despite his rising passion, he took good care to hold his hands aloft — so high, in fact, that his baggy duck trousers backed off bravely from his ankles.

"I'm not going to do anything with *you*," was the retort, "and though I'd like to fix that young fellow that threw the paint on me, I'll have to let him go, for lack of time.

"Come, Parker, I'm after *you*. You come along with me, or there'll be trouble."

Fifteen minutes later Sumner was again a prisoner on board the "Spitfire," which Jones quickly got

under way toward the east. Jim Hilton and Professor Strodder, left so abruptly on Stone Horse Island, watched the yacht grow smaller and smaller till it finally disappeared entirely, and then wondered where in the world they would get breakfast, and how in the world they would get back to Codville. However, I will simply say that they, with the hen, were taken off late that afternoon by the tug "Storm King," and put ashore on Cod Island, little the worse for their adventure, but with wounded spirits and enormous appetites, the hen's egg having been their sole sustenance during their enforced isolation.

It was a disconsolate young fellow who rendered obedience to Jones' commands during the next two days. If ever Sumner realized what it was to be under the thumb of another, it was then. At times moving swiftly ahead under the influence of fresh breezes, and again rolling lazily in a calm, the yacht gradually worked her way eastward. Whatever came, Sumner was constantly under the surveillance of his captor. He got the meals, he tended the jib-sheets, he steered while Jones ate; and when, from sheer weariness, that person found it necessary to take a nap — though never for very long at a time, and then only when it fell calm — Sumner was tied in such a fashion to Jones' wrist that any particular movement on his part would certainly arouse the sleeper.

During this interval Jones made a few alterations about the yacht, but the principal one was changing

her name. The brass letters forming the word "Spitfire" on her stern were unscrewed, enough of them replaced to form the name "Sprite," and the remaining two thrown overboard.

The taffrail log was kept going all the time the yacht had steerageway, and often Jones consulted the charts with which the "Spitfire" was equipped; but to all of Sumner's inquiries regarding their destination he turned a deaf ear.

Now and then a vessel came in sight, but Jones always did his best to avoid them without making his action noticeable, and whenever any craft came dangerously near — so near, in fact, that there was possibility of the yacht being hailed — he locked Sumner in the cabin.

So matters went along until Monday afternoon arrived. Soon after dinner a small blotch appeared on the eastern horizon, which resolved itself rapidly into an island as they drew closer. But now fell another dead calm. Idly the sails flapped as the yacht rolled to and fro on the even swell. Sumner, laying meditatively at the heel of the bowsprit, beneath the swaying jib, gazed at the spot of land ahead, and wondered if that was Jones' destination.

His eyes also caught sight of an object nearer at hand. It looked like a can bobbing in the water not a cable's length away, and lazily he speculated upon it. Where had it come from? What vessel might it not have fallen from? From what distant shore might it not have drifted?

A catspaw forced the yacht slightly ahead, and almost before he realized his action, he had swung down over the bow and picked the can from the water. It had a screw cap, which he removed, and a moment later Sumner was in possession of one of the messages that Val had confided to the sea two days previously. Who will attempt to describe the surprise and consternation that assailed the young fellow as he perused this brief statement regarding the situation of his mates.

"Lugged off!" he muttered incredulously. "Held by a gang of thieves! And there I thought they were safe at home, while they, perhaps, think I'm safe there."

But now into the current of his cogitations broke the harsh voice of his captor.

"Come aft here, and get under cover. There's a steamer coming down on us."

Sumner leisurely obeyed. The steamer had stolen down on them from the north unperceived by Jones till she was close at hand. Her proximity made him nervous, and Sumner was so deliberate in his movements, and took so prolonged a stare at the approaching craft, that it roused the ruffian's wrath.

"Get into the cabin instanter," he said, roughly seizing Sumner by the shoulder and forcing him down the companion. "And mind you," he added, as his prisoner disappeared from view, and the door was closed after him, "in case we're spoken by that craft and you so much as yip, I'll put you where you'll never see another boat."

He locked the door, and turned to watch the rapidly approaching vessel, his uneasiness illy disguised. She was very evidently running up to speak the yacht. There were several persons visible on her forward deck.

"A tug," growled Jones, and braced himself for the encounter.

"Halloo, the yacht!" came a hail from the tug's deck, as she ran alongside the drifting sloop and stopped her engines.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

THE "Sea Rover" was ashore.

Val Brandon and the deck hand quickly recovered from the confusion into which the sudden stoppage threw them, and hastily opening the port door, stepped on deck. They emerged into a bank of fog, so dense that it shut out the moon completely, and rendered objects a yard away invisible.

For a moment they stood in hesitation. All about sounded the soft lap-lap of ripples lightly laving the shore, but forward all was still, till, of a sudden, came the sound of hurried footsteps descending from the wheel-house, and a body dropped over the side, as was evidenced by a loud splash in the water.

Val and his companion walked cautiously toward the bow, peering intently through the thickness.

"Look out for the engineer," cautioned Fenderson, apprehensively.

"I believe he's gone ashore, or at least left the yacht," was Val's low response.

The wheel-house proved to be deserted, as they expected; the lunatic was nowhere on board; but as they stood on the port bow the two heard the sound of splashing water, presently followed by a

crackling of twigs, as though some one was forcing a passage through underbrush.

"Better hail him?" asked Fenderson, after a minute of intent listening.

"No," Val responded forcefully. "Not on your life; good riddance."

The absence of the engineer being assured, they turned their attention to the condition of the yacht. She lay immovable, with a slight list to starboard, and somewhat down by the stern, but in what kind of a berth it was impossible to ascertain. The well, being sounded, showed the hull to be tight.

"Take the wheel, Fenderson," finally ordered Brandon. "We must make an attempt to start her off, dark as it is. It is about high tide now, and if we let her lay, she may sink deeper, and be still harder to get off on the next tide."

For the next ten minutes the propeller churned full speed astern, but without noticeable result, save that the powerful vibrations of the screw shook the yacht from stern to stem.

The attempt to back off was then abandoned for the night, although with much regret, for the steamer might worm herself so snugly into her land berth that floating her later would be a toilsome task, if not, indeed, impossible without assistance.

The chart made it quite evident that they had run ashore on Whale Island, an island about eight miles long by three wide, uninhabited, save for workmen at granite quarries on the northwestern extremity.

By the time this conclusion was reached, it was midnight. During the remainder of the night the two stood alternate watches of an hour each, for Val did not care to run the risk of having the lunatic engineer back in their midst.

The fog lifted when morning broke. The "Sea Rover" lay stranded on a sandy beach at the head of a deep cove or indentation of the shore, some hundred yards in depth, and so closely did she lay under the high bank to port that one could almost jump ashore, even at high tide. Both sides of the cove were heavily wooded out to the very extremities of the two headlands that marked its entrance, where the ocean swell was rolling lazily in.

The cove was not over a hundred feet wide at its broadest place, and now that the tide was out, which on this part of the seaboard falls about ten feet, the yacht was high and dry in its sandy cradle.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" was Val's first exclamation, as he emerged from the cabin soon after daybreak, and took in the situation. "You don't tell me that we ran into this inlet without hitting either point, in the dark, and with a loony at the wheel! I can hardly believe it."

"That's what we did," rejoined Fenderson, with a grin; "and she couldn't have struck in a better place for gettin' her off, seein' she was to run ashore."

"Go and turn in," Val admonished. "Get your hour's sleep, and then we'll see what we can do

toward getting her afloat. I don't believe it will be a very hard job after all."

"Dead easy," was the reply, for Fenderson had evidently been studying the situation. "Just lead two hawsers out astern from the steam windlass, and make 'em fast to the trees, one on each bank. Then if the old girl can't shake herself free on high tide with the screw and capstan too, call me Mud!"

The feasibility of this plan seemed evident. There were plenty of good-sized trees on either shore to give the hawsers firm anchorage, and the more the plan was discussed, the more both became enthused over it, until finally the deck hand flatly refused to turn in again. A hastily prepared breakfast was as hastily disposed of, and they began operations.

There was plenty of hemp roding below decks, and this was gotten up at once. Two lines were led aft from the capstan, one on either side, passed out through hawse holes near the stern, and made fast, each to a tree on opposite sides of the cove, some distance astern.

When this had been accomplished after a deal of pulling and tugging, the slack was carefully taken up on both lines, so that when the moment came to make the second attempt, the strain on both hawsers would be as nearly equal as possible.

During the hours that now elapsed before high tide came again, a search was instituted for the engineer, one remaining on the yacht while the other went ashore. But no trace of Marshall was dis-

covered. Either he had gone to another part of the island or had carefully concealed himself, for the short quest proved entirely unsuccessful.

At half-past eleven, the time given by the nautical almanac for high tide, Val stationed himself at the engine and Fenderson at the capstan. The time had come for the second attempt at floating the "Sea Rover." The safety-valve was blowing off as Val, in response to the deck hand's assurance that everything was "all right," opened the throttle until the yacht's propeller was again churning up the water into froth under her overhang in a strong endeavor to back, and the hull shook with the energetic vibrations.

Still not an inch did the yacht budge from her position. Val next opened the capstan valve. Slowly the hawsers tightened, like huge harp strings, keenly watched by the deck hand. Creak—creak — crack — crack! The tension of the lines in the hawse holes made the stern swing uneasily.

But this could not last forever. Suddenly the hull yielded, and a moment later the yacht slid easily off the sand into deeper water, gaining speed with every revolution of the screw. Overjoyed at the success of the trial, Val promptly shut off all steam, and hurried to congratulate his companion; but scarcely had he put foot on deck when a series of determined toots on the whistle over his head made him start.

"Look out to sea," yelled the deck hand from the

wheel-house, where he was clinging to the whistle cord. Val did so. Off the mouth of the cove was a tug, and as Val gazed, he saw puffs of steam rise from her whistle, and several answering blasts came to his ears. The stranger came about and headed for the cove.

By this time the yacht had lost all backway, and lay quiescent on the gently heaving waters of the cove. Val ran to the stern and gazed eagerly at the tug in the offing.

"What do you make of her?" he called to Fenderson, who had emerged from the wheel-house with the glass to his eyes.

"Storm King," read the deck hand, aloud. "She's a Portland tug."

"Wonder what she's doing here?" Val queried. "We've worked ourselves out of the woods, but perhaps they'll lend us a man to help work the yacht."

Cautiously the approaching tug poked her nose into the cove. A group of people were in her bows.

"Ahoy!" shouted Brandon, when the "Storm King" had gotten within hail.

There was no direct reply to this hail, but of a sudden a general yell went up from the tug's deck, and Val began to wonder if it was a lunatic asylum out for an excursion.

Not long did he wonder. Straightway his eyes caught sight of faces that looked familiar. In sudden excitement he clung tightly to the rail.

"Jerusalem!" he muttered, between set teeth, "can it be they?"

And then as doubt gave way to certainty, he uttered a loud whoop of joy, and waved a hand in energetic welcome.

"Halloo, folkses!"

The "Storm King" slowly steamed into the cove and laid her nose against the stern of the "Sea Rover." Val clambered over the rail, and in an instant was literally received with open arms, for each of his waiting friends tried to seize the young skipper at the same time.

Twenty minutes sufficed for Val to outline his story of how Cal and himself had been abducted, and for his friends to relate the misadventures of Sumner as far as known, including the fact that the young man was probably still in the clutches of Jones and aboard the "Spitfire."

Val's story of the plot to defraud the Liberty Mutual and other insurance companies opened their eyes, but Manager Culverson's most of all, and it was decided that the "Sea Rover" should run to Rockland forthwith, to enable the Manager to wire his company and stop payment on the policy. He was also to advise the Stroudport City Marshal of the attempted fraud, and have Wheelock and "Dr." Pilsingham arrested immediately. Since Val did not know the names of the other companies in which Bangs was insured, Manager Culverson could acquaint only his own of the matter; but the arrest of

the accomplices would effectually hold up all other payments.

Fenderson did not come aboard the "Storm King" while this conversation was progressing, and there was much difference of opinion as to what should be done with him. Some thought he should be delivered to the authorities at once; others advised giving him his liberty. But Fenderson settled matters himself by taking French leave, and when looked for, was nowhere to be found.

Mate Jenkins of the "Storm King" was put in command of the "Rover," and the assistant engineer and one deck hand made up the rest of the crew, Manager Culverson being sole passenger. The yacht was to run at once to Rockland, obtain a sheriff, coal up, and when the Manager's dispatches were sent, return to Tower Island, whither the "Storm King" was to go immediately, carrying the remainder of the party.

After Cal had been released from his unpleasant situation, the search for Sumner was to be renewed by both steamers.

The wood supply on the "Rover" having run very low, sufficient coal to run her to Rockland was placed aboard from the "Storm King's" bunkers. Then the two craft backed out of the cove, and steamed away on their respective errands.

Inasmuch as Val believed that when Major Bangs found the yacht gone he would attempt to leave the island, it was most important that Cal's rescuers

should reach the scene at the earliest possible moment. Though he had no boat, and the raft was aboard the "Rover," yet Bangs might contrive a raft, or a passing vessel might take off his party. To prevent anything of this sort, and render success sure, for the next two hours the tug raced along at full speed.

And then came a surprise.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE "STORM KING" ENCOUNTERS THE "SPRITE"

THE light breeze died down to nothing, and the "Storm King" plowed her way toward Tower Island over a sea of glass.

Shortly after three o'clock in the afternoon a dark mass appeared on the horizon ahead, and Val, standing in the wheel-house with the Captain's binocular in hand, identified it as the island from which he had so recently escaped. It rapidly emerged from obscurity as they approached, and Val intently scrutinized the sea about it for evidences of Bangs and his party. No signs of a raft were visible, but down to the southward was a sail. This might mean Bangs escaping, or Sumner on the "Spitfire," so the tug changed her course to run over and investigate, while all the passengers congregated forward to watch proceedings.

The tug soon closed in on the sailboat, so that without the aid of the glass she was seen to be a small yacht, becalmed, with all sails set.

"By jolly!" murmured Val, as presently he took another look through the glass. No one heard him, and he said no more, but kept his eyes glued on the

object of curiosity. A few minutes later he obtained possession of the glass again, and made further investigations.

"What is she, Val?" his father asked, coming to the bow where his son stood.

The reply was startling, though uttered in low and suppressed tones.

"I believe she is the 'Spitfire.'"

This declaration created a marked sensation. Was this day to see the end of all their worry and trouble?

"She's painted white, like my yacht. Her sails are identical in cut and set. Now as she swings round her trunk shows the same height above the deck. She is the 'Spitfire,' or her double."

"Give me the glass a minute," demanded Mr. Parker. "Can you see any one on board?"

Sumner's father put the binocular to his eyes, and after some effort got the distant craft into the field of vision.

"What is your boat's name?" he inquired, after a minute's prolonged stare; but without waiting for a reply, he began spelling slowly the letters he descried on the stern of the yacht.

"S—" he began. "Her name begins with S, anyway. P—" he continued.

By this time every one wanted to take the glass, and Mr. Parker had a hard time to retain it and keep the yacht in the objective at the same time. But now they were so near that it was possible to

distinguish objects aboard the sailboat with the naked eye. Old Captain Bucklin, who from the wheel-house had been watching both the sailboat and the group on the deck below him with about equal interest and amusement, now sang out:—

"She's got two men aboard."

"Let me take the glass, Parker," insisted Mr. Brandon, "my eyesight may be better than yours."

Reluctantly Mr. Parker relinquished the instrument, and Val's father undertook in turn to get the yacht in range, just as the Captain who, from his superior height, had a somewhat better view, exclaimed:—

"One fellow is driving the other into the cabin."

Curiosity was now at fever heat. Mr. Brandon had gotten the yacht in range.

"Yes," he corroborated, "he has shut him into the cabin, and is locking the door."

"Can you make out her name, father?"

"S — P —" began Mr. Brandon, hesitatingly. "R —" he continued.

"No, I," corrected his son.

"It is R," asseverated the father, decidedly. "S-P-R-I-T-E," he finally announced.

A chill fell on the group.

"Then it is not the 'Spitfire,'" said Mr. Parker, in a tone of gloom.

"Then it's her double," Val declared stoutly.

Meanwhile the tug drove ahead, and in five minutes was near enough to hail the sailboat. A frowsy

looking man stood in the cockpit, apprehensively awaiting his visitors.

"Halloo, the yacht!" called Val, leaning over the rail as the "Storm King" stopped close alongside. "What boat is that?"

"Sloop-yacht 'Sprite' from Boston, bound east on a cruise," was the ready response.

But Val's keen eyes were taking in the unkempt fellow in the cockpit, and every detail of the yacht. Surely he had seen that face before, and such a nose he had never seen upon more than one face. He whispered a few words to the group about him, and then spoke energetically.

"*I* know *you*, Jones. Surrender, you scoundrel, and do it quickly. You've got to the end of *your* rope."

The gleam of the deck hand's revolver flashed in Val's hand.

And Jones gave in. There was no help for it. And as this crisis was reached, and for a moment Jones stood speechless with wrath, the skylight on the sloop's cabin was suddenly lifted, and a well-known head appeared.

"Hooray! Hooray! Shoot the daylights out of him, old man. He deserves it, if ever a fellow did!"

In a few minutes Jones was a secure prisoner aboard the tug, and Sumner was recounting his adventures to an appreciative audience, while the "Storm King" pushed toward Tower Island with

the yacht in tow. In half an hour the harbor entrance was reached, and after running as far up the bay as her skipper dared, the tug came to anchor.

Scarcely had a rowboat dropped into the water alongside, and nearly the entire party, armed to the teeth, prepared to go ashore, when a young man appeared on the beach, and a call came ringing over the waters.

"Glory!" said Val, catching sight of the figure. "There is Cal Morse, as sure as I live!"

And such was the fact.

You may be sure that when the boat reached shore, just as hearty a reception was given Cal, as Sumner and Val had received; and a surprise was in store for the would-be rescuers, for Cal assured them that Bangs, Bruce, and Mike were all at the house, *his prisoners*. It appeared that the pocket file secured by Val from the engineer and given him, was entirely unequal to the task of filing the tempered steel of which the handcuffs and chain were made. It was of soft iron, and better adapted to smoothing finger nails. After wasting a deal of time in finding this out, Cal finally succeeded in abstracting the key from Bangs' pocket on the very night of Val's departure on the yacht.

"All three of them had been getting convivial that night," explained Cal, in the course of his story, as the party hastened to the mansion. "I had no trouble in freeing myself, and also got Bangs' revolver from his pocket. Before that individual

knew what had struck him, half stupefied as he was with liquor, I had the handcuffs on his ankles and his hands tied tightly behind him.

"Bruce and Mike were snoozing downstairs, and with the revolver for a persuader I had little trouble in securing them, and if you had only waited a little while longer, Val," he added, turning affectionately to his chum, "I would have gone with you on the 'Sea Rover,' and we could have taken the prisoners with us."

The prisoners were found silent, sullen, and secure. They would make no response to any questions put them, and when their feet were released and they were ordered to march to the shore, did so with great reluctance.

The fortune that Bangs and his accomplices had schemed to obtain by fraud had vanished like morning mist, and with prison staring them in the face, little wonder it was they did not feel in the best of spirits. When they had been placed safely aboard the tug, and under espionage, Val and Cal conducted their friends over the island that had been their prison for a week, and the subterranean passage and the stone tower, as well as the old mansion, were inspected with deep interest.

They did not trouble to remove the canned provisions Val had stored in the underground retreat; but one thing the young skipper did carry away, and now exhibits with much pride as a souvenir of his experiences — the old pirate flag.

The party spent the night aboard the anchored tug; and day was just breaking when the "Storm King" steamed out of the crescent-shaped harbor, and met the "Rover" just outside with the original party and a sheriff and his posse aboard, for whom, however, there was now little need.

Two days later both steamers, one having the "Spitfire" in tow, ran up to Stevens' Wharf in Stroudport, and a happy party it was that stepped ashore to greet three ladies standing on the pier head. For word had been sent on from Rockland of the successful outcome of the search, and the probable time of arrival at home.

The story of the interrupted cruise is nearly told. The "Spitfire," alias the "Sprite," although bruised by her rough passage through the storm, and decidedly dirty from lack of proper care, was none the worse for her erratic cruise; but after their recent experiences the boys decided that home was good enough for the present, and the remainder of their vacation was spent there, every pleasant day finding them afloat in some part of the bay.

Bangs, Bruce, Wheelock, Dr. Pilsingham, and Mike, all came up for trial at the September term of court, and were sentenced to State's prison for various terms of years. It developed that Pilsingham's claims to the title of "Doctor" were exceedingly slim, while the Major's story of his connection with western flouring mills was made up out of whole cloth. A search was made on Whale Island for

Fenderson and Marshall, but nothing came of it; and the whereabouts of the lunatic as well as the deck hand still remains a conundrum.

Despite Jones' strong avowals that he had thrown the document away, his person was thoroughly searched for the parchment which had been dug up on Stone Horse Island under circumstances so remarkable. It was not found, however, and the boys were forced, much against their will, to believe that the thief, ignorant of its value, had actually disposed of it as he asserted.

A deal of brain power was expended on Val's document, from time to time, in an effort to extort the secret it was supposed to conceal, and Jim Hilton, who stopped off at Stroudport with his sister *en route* for Burlington, at the end of his vacation, bringing Sum's pocket kodak and developing outfit, obtained and carried home with him a copy of the document to study during his leisure moments. He promised faithfully to report any progress he might make in deciphering it, but thus far has reported no success.

The half-cremated remains found in the ruins of the Pod Island cabin were finally identified by a fracture of the skull and other unmistakable marks, as those of a recently deceased Stroudport citizen, despite Bangs' effort to palm them off as his own; and by a chain of circumstantial evidence, which the testimony of Val and Cal strengthened not a little, the police finally secured the person who removed this "evergreen plant" from the cemetery named

"Evergreen," and he was tried and sentenced for body-snatching.

What to do with the "Petrel," alias the "Sea Rover," puzzled the authorities for some days. None of the prisoners would say a word regarding the matter, and no papers were found aboard the yacht to indicate her ownership. But as soon as the story got into the newspapers a claim was put in by Boston parties, and it developed that Major Bangs had leased her for the summer. She eventually went back to her owners.

The life insurance companies, who, through the efforts of the crew of the "Spitfire," were saved from paying thousands of dollars in settlement of fraudulent claims, thoroughly appreciated the part that Val, Cal, and Sum had taken in the affair, and remembered them quite handsomely. But the one souvenir of the trip that Sumner values most highly is the letter he sent Captain Bucklin by carrier-pigeon. This, surrounded by the little kodak pictures that played so important a part in his rescue, he has had framed; and hanging in a conspicuous place in his private room, it never fails to remind him of the time he went on "An Interrupted Cruise."

THE END

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